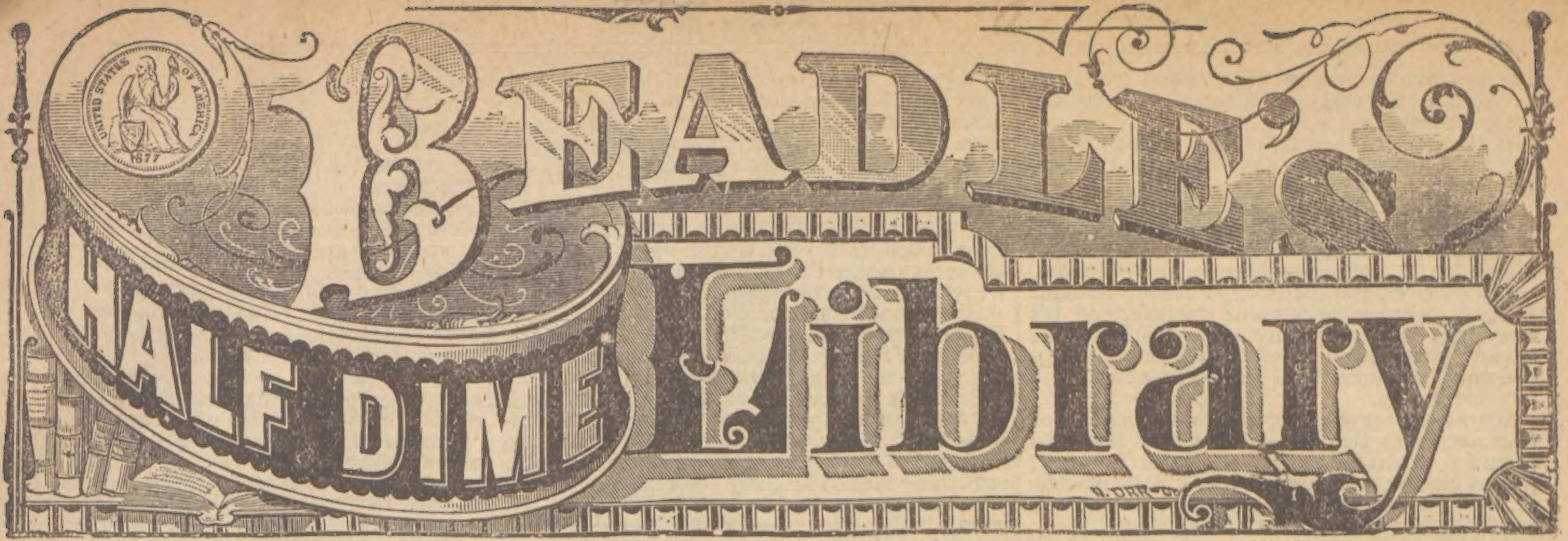


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BEFORE HE COULD MAKE THE SLIGHTEST EFFORT TO SAVE HIMSELF, SOMETHING
FLASHED BRIGHTLY BEFORE HIS EYES.

OR,
The Doomed Six of Sylvania

BY A. F. HOLT.

CHAPTER I.

THE UNKNOWN FRIEND.

A SCENE among the mountains—a vista of wild and picturesque beauty! On either hand towered precipitous cliffs, uprearing their shaggy heads to greet the overarching summer sky that beamed upon them; while jagged bowlders lay on every side, as though the very mountain had been lifted from its bed and shattered into fragments by some mighty hand. Here and there the bright evergreen of the hardy mountain-pine relieved the monotonous gray of the rocky walls, while silvery streams murmured their glad songs, as they rushed leaping and sparkling on their turbulent course.

It was late in the afternoon of a balmy day in June, and the parting rays of the slow-descending

ing sun lightly caressed the bronzed face of a young traveler who toiled laboriously along the rugged mountain-road.

Both form and feature of this solitary youth were well calculated to attract a second glance anywhere.

Scarcely a score of years had passed over his head, yet, straight as an arrow, he possessed a remarkably well-developed form, in which strength and grace were harmoniously blended.

His features, bronzed by exposure to wind and weather, were clear-cut and regular, and his eyes were sharp and piercing as the mountain eagle's, while a handsome mustache but partially concealed the determined expression of a firmly-chiseled mouth.

His attire consisted of a close-fitting suit of dark material that set off his lithe figure to splendid advantage, together with boots of patent leather, and, upon his head, a jaunty hat of the sombrero pattern, from beneath which carelessly hung his locks of wavy brown.

And, too, that the youth wisely believed in the expediency of going armed in that wild region, was evident from the fact that he carried a brace of silver-mounted revolvers in the belt around his waist, while from its sheath protruded the hilt of an ugly-looking hunting-knife.

Such is a description of the young man who pressed over the rocky mountain trail—a personage who is doubtless at once recognized by many of our readers.

Hardly more than a boy in years, yet with a knowledge of Western lore gained by a wide and varied experience in the wild regions of the mines; a thorough mountaineer and crafty trapper; a master-hand with the weapons of both Art and Nature; bold-hearted and daring, even to recklessness, yet cool and discreet in case of necessity—these qualities went to make him a friend to the weak and oppressed, and a veritable terror to evil-doers—a person to be admired by his friends, and feared and respected by his foes.

Hurricane Kit he was generally called, and when the passionate fires that smoldered in his dauntless breast were fully aroused, none could gainsay that the name was aptly applied.

Becoming tired of the monotonous life in the mining-camp of Bullion City, after the exciting episodes in which he had figured prominently* the young trapper had bade adieu to his friends, and started out not so much in quest of new adventures as to once more feel the freedom of mountain life and release from the irksome restraints of the town. So we now find him, picking his perilous way among the great hills. Sure-footed as the mountain-sheep, Hurricane Kit made his way from rock to rock, while at the same time his keen eyes swept eagerly over the rugged landscape. But it was not the weird grandeur of his surroundings that attracted his attention; it was plain that the young man's mind was ill at ease.

"Humph! It's evident there is something wrong," he muttered with fast-growing impatience. "According to my calculations, Sylvania should have been reached at least two hours ago. Can it be that I have missed my way? Hal!"

He suddenly came to a halt, for the rough path abruptly terminated, and in its stead yawned a broad fissure, from the gloomy depths of which the subdued roar of rushing waters was faintly audible.

"Well, well! This is a pretty kettle of fish. No further progress in *this* direction, that is certain; and equally certain it is that I shall be obliged to camp here to-night, unless something turns up."

And something did turn up, though not exactly what could have been anticipated.

As he turned to retrace his steps, a low, ominous growl fell upon his startled ear, and, issuing from behind a neighboring boulder, appeared a monster grizzly bear—the monarch of the mountains.

Whoever knows the strength and ferocity of this king of North American beasts can readily imagine that Hurricane Kit was not precisely pleased at the presence of the hairy intruder.

His position was a peculiar one; with the ferocious beast in front, a yawning chasm behind, and a precipitous wall of rock on either hand, Kit saw at a glance that he was fairly trapped.

There was no way of escape—he must face the music, and the young man lost no time in commencing operations.

Like lightning his hand dropped upon his always ready revolver, the muzzle of which was

brought to bear upon the grizzly which, furiously snarling, was advancing upon him.

Snap! The cartridge failed to explode, and with a cry of dismay, Kit leaped back just in time to avoid the bear's lumbering lunge for him.

But, unfortunately for the youth, in executing this movement his foot struck against a loose fragment of rock, and the next instant he lay supine upon the ground, while the weapon went flying from his grasp.

Half-dazed by the force of his fall, Hurricane Kit lay for an instant incapable of motion, while over him towered the mountain monster, his little red eyes gleaming wickedly.

Brave as he was, a shudder passed through the frame of the young adventurer, as he comprehended his awful danger; but before he could make the slightest effort to save himself, something flashed brightly before his eyes, and with an almost human shriek of agony the grizzly half-reared then rolled over upon the ground beside him.

Hurricane Kit leaped to his feet with a feeling of blended astonishment and gratification, and curiously contemplated the monster, who now was gasping in its death-agony—a bowie-knife of enormous size buried to the hilt in the huge brute's heart!

One glance at his fallen foe, and then Hurricane Kit turned to look for the person who had so unerringly hurled the terrible weapon.

To his great surprise he saw that his unknown deliverer had vanished. The only sign of life to be seen were a number of buzzards that, soaring high above him, seemed like mere specks against the darkening sky.

It seemed as if the hand of Heaven had guided that blade upon its errand of mercy; but Kit was by no means superstitious, and he knew that a human hand had performed the marvelous throw, and a wonderfully skillful one at that.

But who was the mysterious knife-thrower? and how had he so suddenly disappeared after acting the Good Samaritan?

These were the questions that the rover asked himself, and he scrutinized every nook and cranny that could possibly afford shelter to a human being; but a suitable solution to the problem was not forthcoming, cudgel his brain as he might.

"Well," soliloquized Kit, "this is an interesting adventure to commence with; one that savors slightly of the mysterious. The chap who flung that bowie must be troubled with bashfulness, else he would have showed up before now to get the credit for his neat exploit."

"But, whoever he may be, red or white, man or fiend, he has my heartfelt gratitude for his timely interference when the game was against me, and should I chance to discover his identity, I will endeavor to show my appreciation in a more substantial manner. Now, to get out of this confounded region of pitfalls and grizzly bears."

Stopping only to recover his revolver, Hurricane Kit hurried away from the scene of his exciting adventure.

He had a good idea of the direction in which lay his destination, and soon found that he had not strayed a great way from the proper course after all.

Striking the trail, the rover proceeded at a rapid gait, pondering, as he went, upon his recent experience.

"I came here in search of adventure," he muttered, "and I think I have made a fair commencement. Now, I wonder, what has Sylvania got in store for me? Report says that the town is rather quiet for one of its class, but I'll wager I'll find excitement enough to relieve the monotony. I never did visit a strange place yet, without plunging up to my ears in hot water before I had been twenty-four hours in town."

With a light laugh, Hurricane Kit pressed forward, until at last he saw the lights of Sylvania twinkling like fireflies in the deepening gloom.

CHAPTER II.

THE POKER PRINCE.

DEEP in the heart of the Colorado mountains, nestling in a miniature valley between two lines of rugged hills, lies the thriving mining-town of Sylvania.

A name suggestive of green and flower-scented forests, and yet the only woods in the vicinity were the scanty grove of cottonwoods that fringed the stream flowing so peacefully through the valley; but one of the original settlers, who was possessed of a poetic nature, and who appreciated the presence of even this scant foliage in such a barren region, had given the camp its euphonious name.

But in spite of its flowery appellation, there was nothing very æsthetic about Sylvania. The general appearance of the place was much like others of its ilk—a collection of rough, rudely constructed frame buildings, a large share of which were utilized, of course, as drinking and gaming saloons, together with a combination store and post-office, an alleged hotel, and another structure of which further mention will be made anon.

And the inhabitants, of whom there were several hundred, seemed well adapted to their rude surroundings. As is generally the case in a new town in the West, they comprised the very riff-raff of society—rough miners, wily sharpers, reckless adventurers, ruffianly thieves and cut-throats, most of whom were badly "wanted" in some eastern city; while, like roses among thorns, might be seen the truly honest and respectable miner or business man, drawn thither by the insatiable thirst for the golden dross that lured him on with resistless magnetism.

As a matter of course, among such a crowd scenes of bloodshed were by no means uncommon, and the man who would venture forth at night and go his way in safety must needs be well "heeled" and fully capable of holding his own.

Yet, Sylvania had the reputation of being the quietest camp in the neighborhood! Tradition had it that, once in the misty past, for a space of two whole days and nights there was not a single disturbance of any kind, and only one man drank enough fire-water to send him under the table; and so, among its sister towns, Sylvania's citizens had acquired a wide-spread reputation for piety and chicken-heartedness, much to the disgust of the doughty Sylvanians, who resolved to be lively enough in the future to atone for that unfortunate period of quietude.

A few days before this story opens, something occurred to excite the curiosity of the Sylvanians. Among the passengers who alighted from the south-bound stage from Jewel Gulch were two who attracted more than ordinary attention. One was a smart, well-dressed gentleman of middle age, sharp-eyed, and bearded, who had the air of a thorough man of business; the other, his companion, a lady, sylph-like and graceful, whose face a thick veil effectually shielded from the public gaze.

The couple had immediately repaired to the "hotel," where the gentleman registered as Malachi Moore and daughter from Denver; and his next act was to engage a force of men and begin the erection of a building on the outskirts of the town. It was a commodious structure, several times larger than anything in Sylvania, and naturally the miners were exceedingly curious to learn the object of the mysterious Denverite in thus rearing in their midst a building large enough for a circus-tent.

The wildest conjectures were in circulation regarding the matter; one individual, who possessed a remarkably vivid imagination, declared that Moore was associated with Barnum, and was about to open a combination menagerie and museum for their especial edification; another, more practical, opined that the new "shanty" was intended for a hotel that would put their own Miner's Rest emphatically in the shade, a suggestion that caused Red Simon, the proprietor, to knit his shaggy brows and fondle his revolver in a manner that boded no good to the audacious stranger.

And while these vague rumors were going the rounds, the cause of all the commotion kept quietly at work, answering the many inquiries, with twinkling eye:

"Have patience, my friends. Wait but a little while and you shall see."

And with this evasive reply the Sylvanians were forced to be content, for even the workmen were wholly at sea regarding the plans of their employer.

Meantime, Malachi Moore's daughter kept in the seclusion of her own room at the Miner's Rest; her meals were brought her, and not a soul in town had yet caught a glimpse of her features. And this fact furnished food for still further conjecture.

Thus matters stood in Sylvania on the evening when Hurricane Kit first made his entrance into the bustling little town.

It was quite dark when the young rover reached the place, after his exciting adventure in the mountains. Comparatively few of the citizens were abroad, and Kit sauntered along from point to point without attracting special attention.

"Humph! So this is Sylvania, is it?" he mentally interrogated, as he took in his sur-

* See HALF-DIME LIBRARY, No. 399."

roundings as well as the darkness would permit. "Well, I can't see anything very charming about the place from this standpoint; but I suppose this want is more than atoned for by the warmth and vivacity of its inhabitants. Ugh! I expect at any moment to hear an assassin's bullet singing melodiously around my ears. Ah!"

Some unaccountable impulse caused him to suddenly turn his head, and it was fortunate for him that he did so; for, in the indistinct light, he beheld the shadowy form of a burly fellow, in whose upraised hand a keen-edged bowie gleamed wickedly.

Even as he turned the assassin darted forward, and down came the blade, impelled by all the strength of a sinewy arm.

But Hurricane Kit was "on deck." With a lightning-like movement he evaded the murderous blow, and then his iron fist shot out with a force and precision that lifted his assailant fairly off his feet and laid him flat upon the earth.

Whipping a revolver from his belt, Kit sprung forward, determined to wipe out of existence the miserable cur who had made such a cowardly attempt upon his life.

But the fellow was as nimble as a wildcat, and apparently had a head as tough as that of a Congo buck, for, quickly recovering from the effects of the blow he had received, he leaped to his feet and darted away in the darkness, disappearing before Kit could fire a shot.

The adventurer looked after him with a derisive smile.

"That fellow isn't quite so valorous as he was," he muttered. "I guess he imagines that he barked up the wrong tree. But, nevertheless, this being struck at from behind is far from pleasant, and I think I'll adjourn to some locality where every man has an equal show for his money."

Looking about him for some place of shelter, his eye fell upon a shanty that was distinguishable from the rest by a mammoth red lantern swinging above the door.

"The Red Light, eh? Well, the best is good enough for me, and this appears to be as high-toned as any place in range. I think I'll venture to see what is going on inside."

Repairing at once to the saloon, Kit pushed open the door and entered.

He found himself in a large room, so full of tobacco-smoke and blue streaks of profanity, that for a moment he could scarcely distinguish anything else. On one side near the door stood a roughly constructed bar, behind which a dirty, piratical looking individual dispensed his liquid poison to thirsty "pilgrims" in return for their glittering gold. At the rear of the room were several deal tables, together with the paraphernalia of various games of chance, including faro, with which to amuse those who cared to woo the fickle goddess, Fortune.

The saloon was well-filled, and this circumstance went to show that the Red Light was a popular resort for Sylvania's pleasure-seeking citizens.

The entrance of Hurricane Kit attracted considerable attention; not that strangers were by any means uncommon, but the young man's appearance was such as called for more than a passing glance.

But Kit was a fellow who was used to being made the center of observation, and, ignoring the battery of inquiring eyes brought to bear upon him, he sauntered through the room with as much independence as if he owned the whole ranch, occupants included; and, feeling somewhat weary after a long day of travel, he threw himself into a vacant seat, and carelessly watched the movements of the rough crowd assembled around him.

It was a scene wildly picturesque, yet common enough in a mining-town. Shaggy-haired miners, fresh from toil, clad in red flannel shirts, belted breeches of buckskin and cowhide boots, whose pockets were more or less full of the precious dust, ventured their wealth upon the fickle cards, fairly fired by the gaming fever that wrapped them in its tenacious embrace. Win or lose, it was just the same; if they won, it was to continue playing in hope of "cleaning out" their adversary; and when they lost, the hope that luck would turn next time encouraged them to try again.

In contrast to this element were the professional gamblers, sporting their rich attire and massive jewelry—men who lived by the impudence of their laboring fellow-citizens, and who constantly hovered about the gambling-dens, seeking for some innocent pilgrim whom they might devour. Even if dressed alike, the two might, as a rule, be distinguished by their faces; for the miner generally showed an eager,

anxious countenance, marked with fear and desperation, while the card-sharp forever wore the same cool, imperturbable expression; for in Sylvania whimsical Dame Fortune seemed to make it a rule to smile upon the man who possessed the lightest fingers.

A third distinct element were the idlers, men "down on their luck," who had squandered their last cent for drink or at the gaming-table, and were now hanging about the saloon, patiently waiting, like Micawber, for something to turn up. Coarse, ruffianly fellows were they, each and every one of whom would cut a man's throat for a dollar; scarcely a face in the whole room but what bore the traces of crime and dissipation, and Hurricane Kit, as he leisurely surveyed his neighbors, mentally decided that they were about as rough and tough a gang, to judge from appearances, as any with whom he ever had the pleasure of meeting.

At the time when Kit made his advent in the Red Light Saloon, several games were in various stages of progress, one in particular seeming to attract the attention of the bystanders.

The game was draw-poker; one of the participants was an ordinary miner, but his adversary was a man who would attract a second glance 'most anywhere.

Over six feet in height and straight as an arrow, with muscles of steel and the frame of a gladiator; with eyes fiercely flashing as the eagle's, and hair and beard black as the raven's wing; with a bronzed face, once handsome, but now rendered coarse and brutal by a life of lawlessness and dissipation, Karl Kent was a person whom the discreet ones would carefully let alone. There was an expression of grim determination constantly hovering about his sensual mouth, that told plainly that once set upon anything he would leave no stone unturned until he had accomplished his purpose.

Karl Kent, better known among his fellow-citizens as the Poker Prince, from his wondrous proficiency in that game, was one of the leading spirits in Sylvania—bold, reckless and daring, with plenty of wealth to back his every whim, his power and influence, over the rougher element particularly, were such as was possessed by no other man in the camp.

Serenely puffing at a cigar, the Poker Prince played with the calm indifference of one who feels perfectly at home.

His opponent was a man but recently arrived, it was evident, and ignorant of the proficiency of the gambler, else he would not have had the foolhardiness to face him at his own game.

But no one chose to enlighten him, and so it came to pass that the verdant miner beheld his pile of gold fast disappearing into the capacious pockets of his light-fingered adversary; still he played on, hopeful that luck would change, until at last, grown reckless from excitement, he staked his entire remaining wealth, and—lost!

With a cry of despair, the ruined man rushed out into the night, while Karl Kent, throwing away his half-consumed cigar, rose from the table and sauntered to the bar with the fiercely-complacent look of a tiger who has just finished dining off some unfortunate victim.

"My treat, pards. Walk up!" he exclaimed. It is, indeed, rarely that a Westerner will refuse to imbibe; so, at the general invitation of the Poker Prince, the occupants of the saloon lost no time in ranging themselves beside the bar.

All but one; and that solitary individual was Hurricane Kit.

Tired and sleepy from his journey, the young man sat with half-closed eyes in his chair, tipped back against the wall, but partially conscious of what was going on about him.

Of course Karl Kent quickly observed the youth who seemed disinclined to notice his invitation to drink, and a wicked gleam flashed instantaneously into his dusky eyes.

Setting down his glass with a muttered oath, the Poker Prince strode leisurely across the floor, and brought his huge palm heavily down upon the shoulder of the listless young adventurer.

The blow was just impetuous enough to disturb Kit's equilibrium, and man and chair instantly went to the floor with a mighty crash.

CHAPTER III.

THE AVENGER'S BLADE.

FULLY awakened by the fall, Hurricane Kit gained his feet with a bound.

"What are you about, you clumsy galoot?" he demanded, angrily. "Can't you see where you are going?"

Karl Kent showed his white teeth in a tiger-like smile.

"It's my treat, pilgrim," he said, with a careless wave of his hand toward the bar. "Walk up, and proceed to poison yourself with the rest of the gents. Do you catch on?"

"You've certainly got the most cheeky method of asking a man to drink that I ever run across," declared Hurricane Kit, as he felt of his bruised shoulders, "and for unadulterated impudence, my light-fingered friend, you are assuredly entitled to the whole bakery. Go to the deuce with your drinks! When I get ready to poison myself with that vile stuff yonder, I'll order it myself and pay for it."

As this bold speech fell from the lips of indignant Kit, a subdued buzz of astonishment ran through the room. Very few men had dared to address Karl Kent in such a manner, and they had invariably paid dearly for their temerity.

Significant glances and gestures passed from man to man, for they scented fun ahead, even as the war-horse smells the smoke of battle from afar.

As for the Poker Prince, his brutal face turned fairly livid with wrath.

"Young feller," he hissed, "you don't know who you are talking to. Let me tell you that I am Karl Kent, a bad man from 'way back, and when I say the word, every durned galoot that won't drink has got to fight. You hear me, drink or fight!"

However, this belligerent declaration did not affect Hurricane Kit in the manner that the gambler intended that it should.

With a disdainful smile playing about his mouth, and a dangerous light smoldering in his dusky eyes, the young rover fearlessly confronted the Poker Prince.

"Look you, Mister Man," he cried, and his voice was clear and resolute, "I did not come here with the intention of having a fuss with any one, but I advise you to be careful not to crowd me too closely. I may look like a greenhorn, still I imagine it would take a man of more than your caliber to make me sing small."

Incensed before, Kent was now furious with rage, and he spat upon his hands in a way that indicated business, as he strode determinedly forward.

"You do, hey?" he hissed, savagely. "You imagine it will take a bigger man than Karl Kent to get away with you, do you, you infernal young whipper-snapper? I'll show you in about three seconds that the galoot who takes me by the beard had first better make arrangements with his undertaker. Take that!"

As he finished speaking, a huge fist was lanced out with the velocity of a small-sized cyclone. It was his intention to annihilate the youth at one fell stroke, but somehow he missed his calculations.

Hurricane Kit was standing with his back to the wall, and so close that it was impossible to avoid the blow by leaping backward; but just at the critical moment he made a lightning-like movement of his head and shoulders to one side, and the ponderous fist went against the wall with a force that elicited a yell of pain from the lips of its baffled owner.

Then, before the Poker Prince could recover from his surprise, Kit dealt him a tremendous blow under the ear. It was delivered with all the energy that the youth could muster for the occasion, and Karl Kent, fairly lifted from his feet, went down upon the floor with a crash that jarred the building, lying there still and motionless.

The Poker Prince, boasted boss of Sylvania, was completely knocked out, and that, too, before the astonished spectators realized that the fight had fairly begun.

Several of his admirers picked up the senseless form of the fallen hero, and carried him into a rear apartment which the proprietor of the Red Light had thoughtfully provided for just such emergencies.

As for Hurricane Kit, he resumed his seat as unconcerned as if nothing had occurred to disturb his equanimity.

To say that the frequenters of the Red Light were astonished at this unlooked-for termination of affairs would be but to faintly express their feelings.

And though, of course, the majority were in sympathy with Karl Kent, yet there were many who secretly rejoiced at the gambler's discomfiture—men who cordially detested the arrogant Poker Prince, yet, knowing his power, dared not betray their enmity on account of their own interests.

Meantime, while the crowd in the saloon were discussing in low tones the recent disturbance, and Hurricane Kit sat heedless of the wondering

The Knife King.

eyes leveled upon him, the intimate friends of the crestfallen tiger were busily engaged in restoring him to a state of sensibility.

He had received a terrible blow; had Kit struck a little harder, the probabilities are that the Poker Prince would never have juggled another card.

But after nearly a quart of fiery spirits had been poured down his throat, Kent began to feel the effects of the stimulant, and finally opened his eyes.

"Boys," he gasped, as he glared about him in bewilderment, "where am I? Has there been a cyclone, or has some cursed Fenian exploded dynamite under the Red Light?"

"It was something like a young feller that fetched yer a clip under the ear, pard," explained one of the gamester's satellites, "but from ther way he laid yer out, I opine he must be chain-lightning in disguise."

"Curse him, yes, I remember now. The fellow has got a fist like iron. Confusion! My head spins round like a top."

"Which makes it appear as how yer got worsted in thet little scrape," grinned a ruffian. "Jewhittaker! Who'd 'a' thought that young galoot had sich a kink in his muscle?"

A wicked scowl distorted the haggard features of the Poker Prince.

"Yes, curse him," he hissed savagely, "he downed me fairly, but he'll find it was to his cost. No man ever struck Karl Kent, and lived long afterward to boast of it. Where is the young game-cock, now?"

"A-sittin' thar in a chair, lookin' as cool an' comfortable as a basket o' chips," was the response, after a glance through a convenient crack in the partition.

"Boys, give me your attention," whispered Karl Kent, and his black orbs glowed like coals of fire. "That youth must die! At his hands have I suffered my first defeat in the history of Sylvania, and I shall never feel satisfied until I obtain sweet revenge. Three of you—Bowie Tom, Dick Hunt and Red-eyed Jerry, shall be the ones to execute my plans. Now, listen!

"Watch the fellow, and, when he leaves this place, follow his every movement. Dog him like sleuth-hounds until a favorable opportunity arrives, and then—"

"And then?"

"I shall leave it to your own discretion as to the best way of disposing of him. Only let the job be done surely, and so that no blame can fall on my head, which might possibly prove a trifle unpleasant, and, mind you, I'll give each of you a cool two hundred when you bring me satisfactory proof that the work is done."

The eyes of the villainous hirelings glittered avariciously at the mention of the reward.

"It's a go, captain," exclaimed Bowie Tom, voicing the sentiments of his companions in crime; "but," he added, dubiously, "hadn't you better give us an extra man? That young chap is likely ter prove a summat troublesome customer to handle, ye know."

"Bah! What an infernal coward you are, Tom," uttered the gambler, contemptuously. "Why, the fellow is only human, and you are three to one as it is. Besides, if you play your cards shrewdly, he'll have no chance to show fight."

"Nuff said, Cap! We're no scarecrows, you kin gamble on that. We'll claim that two hundred apiece before another sun rises, or else eat our boots for bein' a set of blockheads. You hear me!"

"Good!" exclaimed Karl Kent, with a chuckle.

"I know I can rely upon you. Now, watch your man!"

Through a chink in the partition the three intended assassins closely watched Hurricane Kit, who, meantime, was not as listless and unconcerned as he appeared to be.

He had a vague suspicion that the men in the rear room were up to some kind of mischief, and, careless as ever though he seemed to be, yet every sense was on the alert for danger.

Half an hour passed, and the aspect of the Red Light saloon began to assume its wonted sublimity.

Karl Kent did not seem inclined to show himself again, and the Sylvanians, seeing that the prospects for a continuance of the row were anything but bright, turned for consolation back to their cards and liquors.

But the Red Light was destined to be the scene of a still more exciting episode on that eventful night.

Over in one corner a three-card monte dealer was industriously plying his vocation. He was a rough, burly six-footer, scar-faced and beard-

ed, rejoicing in the cognomen of Nimble-fingered Nat from his proficiency in manipulating the magic pasteboards.

"Walk up, gents," he was saying. "Don't let the late leetle onpleasantness disturb yer taste fur makin' money. Come up and see 'em. Hyar they are—the ten of clubs, the queen of hearts, an' the ace o' spades. See! I jest mix 'em up a leetle, kinder easy like," and the dexterous fingers moved with astonishing rapidity, "then throw 'em down, so, an' pick out the ace. An easy trick, gentlemen, all done by a simple twist o' the wrist, but I'll bet ten dollars ye can't pick out the winning card. Come up, one and all; men, women an' leetle children come unto me. Don't let this gelorious opportunity—"

A crash of falling glass interrupted the garrulous discourse; there was a sudden flash as a bright object swiftly cut the air, and Nimble-fingered Nat, his speech cut short by death, fell heavily to the floor without a cry!

For an instant no one stirred; then, recovering from their amazement, the throng rushed forward and lifted the inanimate form of the monte sharp.

From his broad breast, right over the heart, protruded the cause of his sudden demise—a glittering bowie of extraordinary dimensions; and attached to the haft was a dirty sheet of paper, on which a number of words were rudely scrawled.

The knife was quickly withdrawn from its sheath of human flesh, and with its accompanying message was pinned to the wall where all might peruse it.

And these were the words that met the eyes of the thunderstruck citizens of Sylvania:

"TO THE DOOMED SIX OF SYLVANIA:—"

"Know ye, murderous ruffians, that the time for retribution is at hand. Tremble, for the avenger is among you, with a hand of steel and a weapon to fire! Nimble-fingered Nat is number one. Let the rest take heed, and prepare for the wrath that is to come, for the hand of fate hovers o'er you, and as surely as the sun rises and sets will the wrath of the avenger overtake you. Beware!"

Such was the unsigned message, that, stained with the life-blood of the monte dealer, frowned down upon the astounded occupants of the Red Light Saloon.

For several moments they stood as if petrified with amazement, staring bewilderedly first at the mysterious warning, and then at the pale face of Nimble-fingered Nat, first victim of the self-styled avenger; then, to a man, they rushed pell-mell out of the saloon.

But too much valuable time had been lost, and, as might be expected, nothing was to be seen of the mysterious knife-thrower; he had disappeared as completely as if the earth had suddenly opened and wrapped him in her embrace.

CHAPTER IV.

HURRICANE KIT'S STRATEGY.

REALIZING the utter uselessness of searching for the assassin in the darkness, the infuriated Sylvanians slowly retraced their steps to the interior of the Red Light, when they proceeded to discuss this new and startling occurrence.

To say that they were excited would be giving but poor credit to their feelings, but the dead gambler had many friends among the rougher class, and they expressed a unanimous desire to interview the mysterious person who had so unceremoniously cut him down.

There were two principal questions that agitated the minds of the worthy cits of Sylvania. Who was the avenger? and who were the remaining five of the Doomed Six?

The man with the knife, be he crank, madman or what-not, had certainly demonstrated that he was an ugly customer; and it was a dubious moment for the cits, each of whom fearfully asked of himself if he was one of the marked six who were to feel of the wrath of the avenger.

In this fresh excitement, all thoughts of the recent conflict between Hurricane Kit and the Poker Prince were quickly forgotten.

In the mean time, the young adventurer had been an interested spectator of what had transpired, and it dawned upon his mind that he knew just a trifle more about this mysterious king of the knife than did his neighbors.

He recalled his little adventure in the hills, and, upon examining the bloody bowie that pinned the paper to the wall, he saw that it was exactly similar to the one that had put a quietus to the grizzly bear.

Hurricane Kit made up his mind that the dread Knife-King and his unknown rescuer were identical.

Still this was not telling who he was, and upon this point the young man was obliged to acknowledge himself as wholly at sea as any one.

After tarrying a short time, Hurricane Kit rose and sauntered out into the open air, scarcely had he gone fifty yards when, turning his head, he beheld three men emerge from the saloon and stand in the red light's glare.

They were Bowie Tom, Dick Hunt and Red-eyed Jerry. The ruffians, through the excitement attendant upon the death of Nimble-fingered Nat, had not for a second lost sight of their game; the thoughts of winning the gambler's munificent reward were still uppermost in their minds.

A smile of contempt curled the handsome lip of the rover, as he beheld the villainous trio issue from the Red Light.

"Just as I expected," he muttered. "The wolves are on my track already. Well, let 'em come. I feel just like a first-class scrimmage to-night, and I fancy I can give these fellows exercise enough to keep 'em warm."

Apparently as cool and unconcerned as a Broadway swell upon his afternoon promenade, Hurricane Kit sauntered leisurely through the town; yet eyes and ears were constantly on the alert, while his right hand rested carelessly upon a revolver butt.

Five minutes was enough to bring Kit to the outskirts of the town, and casting a furtive glance over his shoulder, he saw that his pursuers were fast stealing upon him, their shadowy forms just visible in the darkness.

When they were about thirty yards away, Hurricane Kit suddenly wheeled in his tracks, at the same time drawing his trusty weapon.

"Look out, you fellows!" he hailed, warningly. "Don't come any closer, or I'll fill you so full of holes you can't hold water."

At this bold warning the ruffians paused for an instant in hesitation; then the shadows separated, one going to the right and left, while the third dashed straight ahead. Their intention was to surround the youth.

Up came Hurricane Kit's arm, and the next moment a blinding flash lighted the scene, followed by the spiteful crack of the revolver.

"Dick Hunt" was the billet inscribed upon that deadly ball, and the ruffian fell headlong to the earth, uttering a yell of mortal agony.

Quick as a flash the youth dropped behind a convenient boulder, and just in time; for two reports, following in swift succession, rung out upon the still night air, and the bullets flattened themselves against the rock.

Secure behind his rocky breast-wall, Hurricane Kit gave a low chuckle of satisfaction.

"A very good beginning," he told himself. "One of the rascals is where he will never cut another throat; now to dispose of the remaining two."

Cautiously raising his head above the boulder; Kit carefully surveyed the scene.

In the dim light he could barely discern a lithe form creeping with catlike stealthiness from rock to rock; and a glance to the other hand disclosed a similar movement to his vigilant eye.

The youth dropped again to the ground. One look was enough, and he comprehended the plan of his foes as well as if he were one of their number. The roughs were advancing from both sides with the intention of taking their victim by surprise.

"Humph! Two can play at that game," thought Kit. "We shall see who is the slyest my Christian friends."

Hurricane Kit had not spent years of his life in the Indian country for nothing; few could equal him in the strategics of the woods and prairies, and now his knowledge served him in good stead.

It took but a moment for him to perceive just how the land lay.

Behind him flowed the river, rock-strewn and turbulent; on both sides a tangle of boulders and low-growing bushes, through which the two assassins were stealthily creeping, while in front the ground was comparatively level and free from obstructions.

And across this open space Kit determined to retrace his steps; but at this critical moment something occurred to frustrate his designs.

As if in league with his enemies, the moon suddenly straggled out from behind a bank of clouds where she had long been concealed, illuminating the earth with her effulgent rays.

The young ranger, much to his disgust, saw that it was impossible to cross the open without risk of discovery; nor was he fool enough to make the attempt.

Neither did he feel inclined to brave the swirling waters behind him.

Without the slightest hesitation, Hurricane Kit, dropping flat upon his stomach, crawled noiselessly to the left, advancing straight toward the spot where crouched one of his foes.

With an ease and stealth born of experience, the youth wormed his way like a serpent from bush to bush; not the slightest sound was made that would betray his position.

Suddenly Kit paused. From directly in front of him came the suppressed breathing of Karl Kent's hireling, creeping catlike upon his prey.

With an eel-like motion of his lithe body, the rover glided swiftly to one side. Crouching among the bushes, he drew his bowie and silently waited for the ruffian to approach.

It was not his intention to molest him, unless his presence was discovered; the young man had a different plan.

Up came the assassin like a huge snake, his eyes gleaming like coals in the darkness, passing so near to Kit that the latter could have touched him by putting out his hand.

Little did Red-eyed Jerry dream how near he stood to Death's door! Had he been unfortunate enough to discover his enemy crouching there, ten inches of cold steel would have been the reward for his cunning.

With a subdued chuckle, Hurricane Kit allowed his foe to pass on, and then waited patiently for the result of his stratagem.

A minute passed in deathly silence; then suddenly upon the still air came the confused tramping of feet, accompanied by excited cries and the clash of conflicting steel.

The youth's trick had succeeded. The two roughs had attacked one another, each with the impression that the other was their victim, and were battling with the ferocity of a couple of wildcats.

Highly elated at the successful termination of his adventure, Hurricane Kit lost no time in stealing away from the scene.

"Another county heard from," he muttered, "and now I wonder if I shall run across any more of my friends before morning. Thunder! Hear the poor devils fight. I reckon they've reached the conclusion, ere this, that the man who undertakes the job of putting Kit Carroll under the sod has bitten off more than he can chew."

And with this soliloquy, the youth leisurely retraced his steps into Sylvania.

In the private room of the Red Light impatiently sat Karl Kent the Poker Prince, puffing fiercely at a strong cigar. His recent discomfort at the hands of Hurricane Kit had served to rouse all the devilish feelings that smoldered in his fiery heart; nor did the rattling headache produced by the adventurer's terrible blow soothe his ruffled spirits to any great extent.

The thought of being worsted by a mere youth, in the very place where he had so successfully set himself up as the boss of the camp, was like gall and wormwood to the irate gambler.

Anon, he rose and paced to and fro like a caged tiger.

"Curse it!" he growled savagely. "Why don't them fellows come back? Something must have happened—can it be that young devil has wiped 'em all out? Ah!"

The door flew open with a bang, and a man stood panting before the Poker Prince.

And never did mortal eye gaze upon a more woe-begone individual. Wild-eyed and haggard, with tangled hair and tattered garments, while the blood from a dozen ugly cuts, mingled with dirt and perspiration, went to render his appearance far from attractive.

Karl Kent glared at the intruder in astonishment.

"Who in the name of Satan are you, fellow?" he gasped, "an' what sort of a fandango have ye been pokin' your fingers into?"

"What?" exclaimed the forlorn pilgrim. "Don't yer recognize my saintly figger-head, cap'n?"

The Poker Prince knew the voice instantly. "Bowie Tom, by the eternal!" he ejaculated, in amazement.

"Yas, Bowie Tom, what thar is left on him, which ain't any great shakes, I opine," gasped that worthy, sinking exhausted into a chair.

"What on earth has happened, Tom? You look as if you'd been drawn through a thrashing-machine. Did you get away with Hurricane Kit?"

The crestfallen ruffian gave vent to a snort of disgust.

"Did we, the devil," he growled. "Fact is, cap'n, the durned quintessence of chain-lightning jest got away with us, most emphatically."

The Poker Prince uttered a horrible oath.

"A thousand furies! Tell me all about it. Quick, man!"

Thus urged, Bowie Tom recited his experience from the time he and his two companions left the Red Light on their murderous mission.

"Yer see, cap'n," he explained, in conclusion, "I reached ther rock behind which Hurricane Kit hid hisself, and was just a-goin' ter spring fer him, when a feller jumped up an' went fur me with his bowie. Then we had it, red-hot, for a minit er two. Ther critter give me slash after slash, but none of 'em war deep; an' finally I got plum to his heart, an' he went ter grass with a thud. But when I dragged him out inter the moonlight ter take a look at his face, lo! it wa'n't Kit at all, but poor Red-eyed Jerry!"

With lowering brow and fiercely-gleaming eyes, the Poker Prince listened to the story of his dilapidated hireling; and when he had finished, he hurled his half-smoked cigar upon the floor and stamped upon it in his supreme anger.

"Foiled again!" he exclaimed. "I might have anticipated the result when I ordered you onto his trail. Perdition! two of my best men gone the first thing. That Hurricane Kit is a very fiend—"

"Ole Nick in ther disguise of a human," put in Bowie Tom.

"Hark you, Tom! We are not defeated, yet, by any means. Hurricane Kit must be sat upon at once, else I shall find my power in this place fast disappearing. If force won't succeed, strategy may; anyhow, we must squelch him at any cost, if possible. Vengeance demands it!"

Bowie Tom nodded approvingly.

"Put it thar, cap'n! I'm with yer through thick and thin."

And then the two villains proceeded to concoct a scheme intended to prove the destruction of the dauntless young rover, Hurricane Kit.

CHAPTER V.

THE ROLLER QUEEN.

WHEN morning dawned, there was fresh excitement in the town; for a third time within a few hours the worthy cits were regaled with a sensation.

However, there was no tragedy on the programme this time.

When the early birds of Sylvania sallied out in the early morning, they were surprised by the work that had been done in their midst during the night.

Gorgeously colored posters glared down upon the astonished Sylvanians from every tree, building and other point of vantage; all of them were alike, and ran as follows:

"ATTENTION!!!

GRAND OPENING OF THE
SYLVANIA SKATING-RINK!

Monday Evening, April 13.

"The proprietor, Mr. Malachi Moore, of Denver, wishes to announce to the pleasure-loving people of Sylvania, that his new and superb rink will be at their disposal on every evening (Sundays excepted) on and after the above date. This gentleman, who has had large experience in the East, has fitted up his establishment, regardless of expense, with all the modern improvements—elegant floor, superb skates, ample accommodations, brilliant lights, capable assistants; and now would respectfully solicit the patronage of the public. As a special attraction,

MISS MINETTA MOORE

acknowledged by press and public to be one of the finest lady skaters in the country, will give an exhibition of her grace and skill on

EACH AND EVERY EVENING.

"Remember, an excellent band of music will be in attendance, and refreshments served at the bar.

Admission, 50 cents.

COME ONE! COME ALL!"

Such was the elaborately worded announcement that electrified the wondering inhabitants of Sylvania, everywhere looking down in all the brilliancy that pryster's ink could produce.

And above the mysterious building of Malachi Moore, floating proudly from a hastily-constructed staff, the glorious Stars and Stripes fluttered in the breeze, inscribed with the legend:

"SYLVANIA SKATING-RINK."

So the mystery was made clear at last. The mammoth structure that had so long puzzled the wise-heads of the town, had proved to be,

neither a hotel nor a circus, but simply a roller rink.

However, the majority of the rough-and-ready Sylvanians were hardly more enlightened than before reading the announcement, for but few of them, isolated as they were from the world of society, had even heard of the craze that was spreading with such astonishing rapidity over the whole country; and even these few had only a vague idea of the meaning of the term.

Yet, the Sylvanians were inclined to take kindly to any new amusement, and the mere mention of a bar and refreshments was sufficient to convince the skeptical that the new fandango, as they termed it, could not be so very bad a thing anyhow.

Those flaming red and yellow posters served to set everybody agog with excitement; men gathered in little groups to discuss the new departure, while a crowd collected before the barred doors of the rink, waiting in a state of eager expectancy.

Hurricane Kit, too, read the notice, and he shared the curiosity of his neighbors, for he knew nothing of that modern institution, the roller rink, save through hearsay.

"I wonder if this skillful Queen of the Rollers is handsome," he soliloquized, his thoughts turning to the Denverite's daughter. "They say she has never shown her face to any one since she arrived. Probably she means to electrify these red-shirted dirt-diggers when she makes her appearance upon the dizzy wheels. Humph! I will take in this new-fangled circus. Perhaps there's a chance for further adventure."

With this resolution, the young adventurer strolled leisurely through the town.

Nothing was to be seen of the Poker Prince and his right-hand man, Bowie Tom; they were keeping shady, evidently hatching some fresh mischief.

Hurricane Kit felt that he was not yet through with the gambler, but, confident that his hand could keep his head, he allowed the subject to give him but little concern.

Meantime, the excitement that had prevailed the night before regarding the sudden demise of Nimble-fingered Nat, the monte man, had in a measure died away. The skating rink was uppermost in the minds of the Sylvanians, and, for the time being, scarcely a thought was bestowed upon the mysterious Knife-King.

The day dragged itself slowly away, and night came at last, to the great relief of the expectant cits.

Everybody was astir, and the new skating-rink was the Mecca toward which the pilgrims' feet were directed.

Hurricane Kit went along with the crowd, and gaining admittance to the building, looked around him with considerable interest.

The structure itself was but roughly finished on the inside as well as out. The skating surface was in the center, and occupied about two thirds of the space; it was not a remarkably smooth floor, dangerous little cracks and knots being visible in many places, yet it was a very creditable one, taking all things into consideration.

The surface was surrounded by a rude railing, left open at one end, where the skaters might enter; and the space between this and the wall, extending entirely around the rink, was intended for the accommodation of the spectators.

At one end was constructed a spacious bar, upon the shelves behind which numerous gayly labeled bottles stood in tempting array. A dapper young chap, known as Wiggling Joe, from his quick and eel-like movements, presided at the bar, dealing out his liquid stock-in-trade to thirsty skaters under various high-sounding titles, although he knew full well that each and every bottle in the establishment was filled from the same barrel.

The remaining space within the walls was divided up into a number of small apartments, a skate-room, coat-room, and private office being prominent among the number, each of the first being under the charge of capable assistants, viz.: Loose Ben and Turnup Tommy.

A number of lamps with burnished reflectors were hung upon the walls, and illumined the scene with their mellow glow.

But the most remarkable thing within the rink was the band-stand—nothing more nor less than a huge miner's basket, suspended from the beams by a strong rope.

Three pieces—a bass-drum, a wheezy cornet and a somewhat aged fiddle, went to make up the inspiring music advertised; not a very extensive band, but to the eyes of these isolated men of the mines it looked "jest gelorious."

Such was the new skating-rink, not remarkably elegant in its appointments, yet fully

equal to the expectancy of the Sylvania; and if the patrons were satisfied, what more could any proprietor desire?

Malachi Moore, proprietor and manager, stood in the open door raking in the silver with "a smile that was childlike and bland." His venture was meeting with a rousing reception, and the shrewd Denverite saw that, if the craze continued, he would quickly be upon the high road to fortune.

When Hurricane Kit reached the place the fun was at its height.

The place was filled to overflowing, nearly every soul in Sylvania being there to attend the grand opening, eager to enjoy the novel sport, and curious to see the mysterious Minetta, queen of roller skaters.

On the skating surface, the scene was one like the like of which had never been dreamed of by those who were now participating—one which caused much amusement among that portion of the crowd who were too cautious to trust themselves upon a footing less secure than their own broad soles.

Over a hundred roughly dressed miners, not one of whom had ever seen a pair of roller-skates before, cavorted over the floor with gyrations that were truly wonderful.

Slipping and sprawling, with crash and clatter, there was no time when at least a third of the skaters were not resting on some other member than their feet. Here, a venturesome piker would start off with the grim determination to do or die, then rashly attempt to slide the remaining distance on his ear; there, another would whirl round like a top, clutch frantically at nothing in particular, and then go down with a terrific crash, bringing half a dozen of his neighbors with him by a reckless tossing of legs and arms. Attitudes were attained that would have caused a circus acrobat to turn green with envy, had he been there to see.

Swaying to and fro above the floor, the musical trio played away as if for dear life, in the attempt to make their instruments heard above the rumbling of skates and the crash of falling bodies.

It was a scene never to be forgotten, and the loud laughter of the delighted spectators, as they passed more or less complimentary remarks upon their friends, showed that they appreciated it.

Among those upon the surface, there was one who is deserving of more than a passing glance.

A young fellow known about town as Clarence the Major, a chap nattily attired, who had a partiality for pork-pies, half-and-half, and other like delicacies, together with a decided *impartiality* for dirty work. With the reputation of being the best-looking fellow in camp, together with an immense quantity of cheek to back him, he had successfully worked Malachi Moore for a "snap," and now a glittering silver badge upon his manly breast proclaimed him to the public as "floor-manager" of the Sylvania skating-rink.

Clarence the Major was a born "masher," but unfortunately there were none of the fair sex in town upon whom he could exercise his manifold charms.

However, when the Denverite appeared with his daughter, Clarence felt that his star was in the ascendant at last.

With carefully-brushed clothes and brightly-polished shoes, nicely-waxed mustache and perfumed breath, the young man was the most prominent figure upon the skating-floor.

He had practiced assiduously upon the tricky little wheels for the past two days in preparation for his *debut*, and now his movements were several degrees more graceful than those of a crippled camel; of course he felt his superiority, and was already combining business with pleasure by challenging any man on the floor to a race for fifty dollars a side.

However, sad to relate, the Major's elegant appearance was not appreciated to any great extent, and so it came to pass that the sprightly youth more than once found himself reclining gracefully upon the slippery floor, his legs tangled up with those of some mischievous miner.

Malachi Moore was wise enough not to attempt to put his patrons under too much restraint, yet there was one rule which he insisted on having rigidly enforced. No one was allowed to skate unless they first deposited their weapons at the coat-room, receiving in return therefor a numbered check. The miners readily conformed to this rule, for they were sensible enough to see how unpleasant it would be to sit down heavily upon a belt full of loaded "sixes."

And so the fun waxed fast and furious, the hours flying like minutes to the occupants of the rink, each and all of whom emphatically declared that they had never had so much sport before in their lives.

Finally, at ten o'clock, a shrill whistle rung through the hall, telling that the time was at hand for the skating queen to make her appearance. Quickly the floor was cleared, and the audience waited in a state of breathless expectancy.

A moment passed; then from the private room Clarence the Major issued, escorting Minetta Moore the roller queen.

A murmur of admiration rose from the rough assembly; never had they feasted their eyes upon so beautiful a girl.

Scarcely seventeen, with a form as lithe and graceful as a fairy; a wealth of golden hair floated down her back, confined by a jeweled tiara of silver; her features were perfect; her cheeks had the delicate tinge of the peach, and her mouth was like a rosebud; her bright blue eyes beamed like the summer skies. Her neck and arms were bare, and she wore a handsome dress of blue silk, spangled with silver, that reached to the knees; golden bracelets encircled her delicate wrists, and around her neck was hung a necklace of pearls. Mounted upon a dainty pair of skates, she appeared amidst the rough men of Sylvania like a nymph from fairy-land.

It was the proudest moment in the life of Clarence the Major, as he held the tiny palm of the lovely creature in his own broad hand, and led her obsequiously to the edge of the surface.

"Gents of Sylvania," he announced, with a mighty flourish, "it gives me the most profound pleasure to thus be privileged to introduce to you Miss Minetta Moore, acknowledged universally to be the queen of her profession."

And then he sat down, promptly and emphatically, for in his nervousness he had forgotten the circumstance that he was mounted upon a pair of rather clumsy roller-skates.

A yell of derision went up from the delighted spectators, but it was instantly checked, for just then the musicians struck up a lively air, and the roller queen, with a graceful toss of her pretty head, glided out upon the floor.

As lightly as an elf she circled round the hall, every movement the very poetry of motion, performing the most difficult figures with the ease and grace of a master-hand.

For several minutes the audience watched her as if spell-bound; then they rose, to a man, and the rink echoed and re-echoed with their vociferous applause.

But suddenly, above the shouts of the spectators and the crash of the band, sounded the sharp, spiteful report of a pistol, and the roller queen, throwing up her arms with a low cry, fell headlong to the floor!

CHAPTER VI.

HURRICANE KIT IN DANGER.

THE wildest excitement reigned within the skating rink, when the beautiful girl fell, struck down by the deadly bullet of the assassin.

The coolest man in the crowd was Hurricane Kit. His quick eye had caught a glimpse of a villainous face at one of the windows, and without an instant's hesitation, he pulled a revolver from his belt and made a rush for the door, determined to shoot down the dastardly scoundrel.

As he did so, a form bounded in pursuit, and, ringing high above the din, was heard the voice of Karl Kent, the Poker Prince:

"There he is! The young feller with the barker in his hand. After him, boys! Kill the treacherous scoundrel!"

Unheeding these words, Kit dashed outside. Nothing was to be seen of the assassin.

The youth paused in hesitation, just as a mob of excited men poured from the building.

"Hyar he is! Down with him, boys! Shoot the cowardly skunk!" were the ominous words that assailed Kit's ears.

Then swiftly came the stern voice of the gambler prince:

"Don't shoot, boys! Take him alive, an' he shall swing from the nearest limb to-morrow. Lively, now!"

Utterly amazed, Hurricane Kit offered no resistance, indeed, it would have been useless if he had.

The crowd pounced upon him like tigers, and in a twinkling he was bound and helpless.

Quickly a vast crowd collected on the spot, and fierce and venomous were the glances bestowed upon their bewildered prisoner; undoubt-

edly, they would have made quick work of him, but for the intervention of the Poker Prince.

Acting under the latter's orders, several of the cits picked up the young adventurer, carrying him to an empty cabin on the outskirts of the camp, where, with a guard at the door, he was left to meditate upon his situation.

All this had occurred in 'most as little time as it has taken to tell it—so quickly that Hurricane Kit hardly realized what was transpiring until he found himself lying alone upon the rude floor of the hut, bound hand and foot.

Outside, he could hear the excited shouts of the Sylvania, as they hurried to and fro; but gradually the tumult died away, and soon the town was once more wrapped in comparative silence.

Kit had ample opportunity to ponder upon his novel predicament, and, as might be imagined, he was not particularly pleased with the result of his night's entertainment.

It seemed curious that events should have happened as they did; in his eagerness to capture the man who had shot down the roller queen, he had himself been taken for the assassin by the bull-headed citizens, and what the end would be was only a matter of conjecture.

Kit knew the character of the men of Sylvania too well to waste his breath in an attempt to convince them of their error; once excited, to listen to reason is the last thing thought of by the average Westerner, and the youth realized that the best thing to do under the circumstances was to keep cool and take things as they come.

However, as Kit continued to ponder upon the subject, a thought occurred to him that seemed to throw a little light upon the situation.

He suddenly recalled the loud-spoken words of Karl Kent, the Poker Prince, as he had made a rush for the door:

"There he is! After him, boys! Kill the treacherous scoundrel!"

And then the truth dawned upon Kit's mind.

His denouncement and capture were evidently but a preconceived scheme on the part of the gambler and his satellites, carefully planned and executed with the design of setting the town's populace against him.

And if such was, indeed, the case, the Poker Prince had succeeded nicely so far; the rest seemed comparatively easy of accomplishment, for, if the present popular sentiment continued to prevail, a short shrift and a long rope would soon be the reward of the luckless adventurer.

Hurricane Kit saw that, with the powerful Poker Prince working against him, he was in a rather tight box; and a furious exclamation escaped his lips as he realized how neatly he had been caught napping.

Yet, he was far from being dead, and being one of those sanguine spirits who never quail so long as the faintest glimmer of hope remains, he was inclined to believe that he would yet come out all right.

"I expect to go under some time," he muttered, "but when I do, it will be with flying colors, and not trussed up like a turkey at the end of a rope. My good genius has always hovered over me, so far, and I shall rely upon him to help me out of this unpleasant little muddle. Now for a little snooze!"

Ordinarily in time of danger Hurricane Kit, ever on the alert, never thought of sleep, but in his present predicament he was just as safe asleep as awake; so in spite of his peril and the decided discomfort of his position, bound and helpless, he soon dropped into a calm, untroubled slumber.

How long he continued in this state he knew not, but he was awakened by the sound of voices just outside the door of his prison.

It was the guard and one of his friends; instantly Kit was wide awake and attentive.

"Yas," the former was saying, with a sleepy yawn, "it's rather lonesome work walkin' up an' down hyer in ther dark, I opine, when ther rest of the boys are havin' a red-hot time. Ther's no more need o' stayin' hyar than ther is of a dog havin' ten tails, for the p'ison young varmint inside is done up in more hemp than he could saw through in a month. But them's the boss's orders, an' I s'pose they'll hev ter be obeyed, else I'll lose my precious head. What's the news, Jack? How's the durned thing pannin' out?"

"Not so well as it might hev done," came the dubious answer of Utah Jack.

"Why? What's the trouble now?"

"Wal, ye see, some o' ther obstinate ones—fellers that never take anything fur granted, but are continually arguin' ther whys and wherefores of it all, are beginnin' ter think thet they've got ther wrong rooster by ther tail; an'

ther durn onerary galoots actually hev compunctions ag'inst stringin' up er innocent man-d'ye see?"

Red Sam, the guard, gave vent to a snort of heartfelt disgust.

"It's jest sech chicken-hearted critters thet spoil all ther picnics," he growled. "So, then, our game is goin' fur nothin', is it?"

"Not much! Ther boss is afraid that if he waits till mornin' these tender-hearted cits 'll go an' turn ther young galoot loose; so he don't propose ter waste no time in useless foolin', you bet."

"Wot's he goin' ter do?"

"Dunno ther particulars. He jest sent me down ter tell you that if you see a party of gents meandering in this direction any time 'twixt now an' daylight not to get excited an' blaze away at 'em, but jest take things as they come. D'ye savvy?"

"I ruther think I begin ter kotch on," responded Red Sam, with a laugh. "But, say, pard, what of the gal? Is she dead?"

"Naw; they thought she wuz at first, but they soon brought her round, alive an' kickin'. Ther ball grazed her temple, stunnin' her, jest as Bowie Tom intended it should. Jerusalem tomcats! it war a han'some shot. Tom couldn't make a better one if he had practiced s'teen years."

"Im glad ther gal ain't hurt, fur she are a purty piece o' kaliker, an' no discount. Wal, Jack, I'll remember yer message, an' if any galoots come moseying round hyar after ther prisoner, they won't hev much trouble in takin' him off my han's."

"All right. Wal, I mus' go back now. Ta-ta!"

The voices ceased, and the prisoner within the shanty could hear the heavy tread of Utah Jack as he made his way back to the camp.

Hurricane Kit's feeling of insecurity was by no means decreased by this startling piece of intelligence.

"Humph! So that is your game, is it, my festive gambler? My sky begins to darken! Well, I suppose there is no way but to face the music. Come right along, Karl Kent, with your gang of cut-throats."

The young man did not have long to wait for his enemies.

Before ten minutes had elapsed, his eager ears caught the sound of approaching footsteps.

The next moment the door of the hut was swung open, and Karl Kent entered with half-a-dozen ruffians at his back.

There was an ugly gleam in his dark eyes, as he glared upon his helpless foe in silent exultation.

Without a word from any one, Hurricane Kit was picked up by the roughs, and carried from the cabin with considerably more haste than ceremony.

Reaching the open air, the party hurried off down the valley, bearing their human burden; noiseless as phantoms they glided, until nearly a mile had been placed between them and the mining-camp.

Then Karl Kent ordered a halt by the side of the creek, just as the dull gray light of dawn began to appear in the eastern sky.

The men were evidently previously instructed, for they instantly went to work at a sign from their leader.

On the bank stood a large tree with outspreading branches, and under this Hurricane Kit was made to stand; a knotted rope was produced, the noose placed around the young man's neck, and the other end tossed over the nearest limb.

It took but a minute to thus make everything in readiness for the tragic scene; and during the preparations, not a word was uttered, the ruffians proceeding with the grim determination of as many fiends.

As for Hurricane Kit, their luckless victim, he felt that his case was now hopeless.

Death stared him in the face, but not an instant did his bold heart quail. He calmly watched the movements of his enemies, with a disdainful sneer upon his handsome face, and in his breast a grim resolve to meet his doom like a true hero.

And now the Poker Prince, standing there with folded arms, stern and pitiless as Fate itself, a fiendish smile wreathing his lips, gave a commanding nod; a dozen hands laid hold of the fatal rope and pulled with a will, and the next moment the body of Hurricane Kit was dangling in mid-air.

But only for an instant! As swift and bright as the swallow's wing, an object suddenly cleft the air; the cord parted, and Hurricane Kit dropped heavily to the ground, stunned by the

fall, while the fellows at the other end of the rope suddenly came together in a confused heap.

Karl Kent uttered a startled oath.

"Perdition!" he cried. "What in the fiend's name is the meaning of this?"

The surprised ruffians gained their feet, and glared at their leader in speechless bewilderment.

"Cap'n," exclaimed Utah Jack, "that rope was cut, an' who could 'a' done it but that cursed—Ah!"

A leap into the air, a fall, a groan, a spasmodic struggle; and the rough lay lifeless upon the sward, a keen blade buried in his heart.

At the same moment a weird, wild voice rung out upon the clear air of morning:

"Ha, ha! Vengeance is sweet! Vipers, see before you the work of the Knife-King. Utah Jack was number two—Bill Burke, you are number three!"

Upon the ears of the ruffian last mentioned, these words rung like the knell of doom.

White as a ghost, Bill Burke glared wildly about him, with arms upraised as if to ward off the avenging blow.

In vain! Coming like the lightning's stroke, from whence no one knew, another blade flew, swift and sure, to the heart of the marked ruffian.

Without a cry he sunk down, while the Poker Prince and his remaining men, fairly maddened by fear, burst from the spell that seemed to hold them powerless, and fled wildly from the dangerous presence of the dread Knife-King!

CHAPTER VII.

THE KNIFE-KING.

HURLED headlong to the earth by the sudden parting of the rope that encircled his neck, Hurricane Kit was stunned by the shock, and lay utterly unconscious of the startling events that were transpiring about him.

When he did recover his senses, it was to find himself in Egyptian darkness; and for an instant his bewildered mind could hardly comprehend whether he were dead or alive.

But a moment of perplexity, and he was convinced that he was still in the flesh, after all.

Kit slowly assumed a sitting posture, and ruefully rubbed his bruised and aching body.

"Humph!" he muttered. "This world is full of strange and curious freaks. The last I can remember of, I was dangling at the business end of a rope, with half a dozen lusty chaps hauling away for dear life; an' now I find myself still alive an' kicking, but—where? I'm particularly anxious, just now, to learn the topography of my whereabouts, and also ascertain to whom I am indebted for the pleasure of being here. The person, whoever he may be, was exceedingly kind to set my limbs at liberty; but he might have been thoughtful enough to leave me a light, that I might see what sort of an infernal rat-hole I'm in. Ah!"

A light suddenly flashed upon his eyes, illuminating his surroundings, as a tall man, bearing a torch, made his appearance before him.

Somewhat past the prime of life, yet straight and rugged as the mountain pine, with powerful frame and long, sinewy limbs, he looked the picture of health and strength.

Once remarkably handsome, his features still retained much of their original beauty; his lips were firmly chiseled, and his dark eyes, glowing like the subdued fires of a volcano, told that he was a very lion when aroused. His head was bare, and down his neck long, wavy masses of iron-gray hair hung unconfined.

The dress of the man consisted throughout of buckskin, neatly fringed, and dyed a somber black, while a pair of beaded moccasins incased his feet.

Around his waist was buckled a leathern belt, from which protruded the only weapons he apparently possessed—fully a dozen huge, keen-edged bowie-knives, in a glittering row.

And it was this peculiarity that evoked a cry of surprised curiosity from the lips of Hurricane Kit, as he stared at the person who confronted him, while from his lips involuntarily fell the words:

"The Knife-King!"

A grim, sorrowful smile played for an instant about the features of the unknown, then vanished, leaving the face as stern as before.

"Yes; I believe I am sometimes so called by the men of yonder camp, my friend," he answered in a voice that was far from unpleasant. "Are you not glad to see me?"

"If you are the chap who saved me from the playful clutches of Karl Kent's cut-throats, jest now, then I assuredly am," was the prompt re-

sponse of the young adventurer, "both from a desire to satisfy my curiosity, and also to have an opportunity to thank you for your timely interference in my behalf, both to-day and in the mountains yesterday."

"You refer to the grizzly bear episode, I conclude, young man; but, I beg of you, express your thanks in a more silent manner by saying nothing about it. In neither instance was the deed more than would have been done by any being having a human heart."

"Though, perhaps, executed in a more thorough manner," suggested Kit.

Again the grim smile, while his eyes flashed as he laid a hand caressingly upon one of his glittering blades.

"My hand is swift and sure, and the glistening steel flies straight as an arrow from the bow-string," he cried, proudly. "Woe unto the man who incurs the wrath of the Knife-King. The hand of doom shall smite him, and his bones be left to bleach upon the mountain-side. Not one shall escape; no, not one."

There was a tinge of insanity in both looks and speech, and Hurricane Kit, in spite of the knowledge that the Knife-King had saved his life on two different occasions, and appeared to be friendly, did not feel wholly at his ease.

There is no accounting for the freaks of a madman; and Kit, wholly unarmed realized, that he was powerless, should the mysterious being choose to make him a target for his knife practice.

Under the circumstances, it is not strange that the youth wished himself well out of his present predicament.

"I think," said he, with an inquiring glance about him, "that I will be making my way back to Sylvania. If you will be so obliging as to show me the way to the gulch, I will trespass no longer upon your hospitality."

A short, bitter laugh fell from the lips of the Knife-King; he seemed to read the young man's mind as easily as though it were the pages of an open book.

"I see," he exclaimed. "You don't appreciate my kindness; you look upon me as a red-handed assassin—you are afraid!"

The hot blood mantled instantly to the brow of the rover.

"Not so; I fear neither man nor fiend!" he declared boldly. "And while I assure you that I appreciate your intervention in my behalf, yet I hardly feel like cultivating an acquaintance with one who makes a practice of such bloody deeds as you are credited with—as, for instance the killing of Nimble-Fingered Nat, the monte dealer. That's my sentiment."

And with this blunt speech Hurricane Kit coolly waited, with folded arms, for the effect of the daring words.

But if the Knife-King felt any anger he failed to show it; instead, a look of pain flitted like a shadow over his bearded face.

"Young man," he exclaimed, impressively, "I am a true friend of yours, for you are, I believe, both brave and honest, and, as past events have proved to me, at enmity with Karl Kent and his lawless associates. That, alone, should be ample reason for our friendship. Before you go, listen to the life history of Kenneth Kirke, now called the Knife-King. Then you shall tell me whether or not you think him as black as you would have him painted."

Kit's face brightened; for here was an opportunity to learn the mystery of the dread avenger, whose exploits were agitating the inhabitants of Sylvania.

"All right; spin ahead," he said, eagerly. "I shall be pleased to hear it."

"Your wish shall be quickly gratified; but first let me provide you with some food, for you must be hungry after your night of adventure."

With these words the unknown disappeared, leaving Kit at liberty to survey his surroundings.

By the flaring light of the torch, he perceived that he was in a rude underground chamber, the floor and walls of which were of solid rock, the latter being hung with the skins of various beasts; a rude couch of bearskins, in one corner, formed the only article of furniture. In the wall on one side was a dark opening, through which the Knife-King had passed, this evidently leading to a second apartment.

Hurricane Kit gazed about him with curious eyes.

"This is an adventure of which I little dreamed," he thought. "I am eager to hear the yarn of this self-styled avenger. He don't seem to be such a bad sort of a fellow, after all; still, there's no telling what freak may seize him, and I shall

be just as well contented when I once more walk in the light of day."

At this moment the avenger returned, bearing upon a wooden platter a quantity of smoking hot venison, the odor of which tantalizingly assailed the nostrils of hungry Kit.

"Eat," commanded the Knife-King, as he set the tempting mess before his guest. "It is the best I have to offer you; nevertheless, I trust you will not be disgusted at my humble fare."

Disgusted, indeed! The young rover, profuse in his thanks, lost no time in attacking the savory dish with the vim and relish of a man who is hungry; and as he ate, the Knife-King stood by and told his story, which is substantially as follows:

Twenty years prior to the opening of this narrative, there resided in a quiet Eastern town two young men named Kenneth Kirke and Karl Kent. Alike in age and appearance, yet otherwise vastly different; Kirke was a general favorite, while the other was universally disliked for his ugly, quarrelsome disposition, which was wont to show itself on every favorable occasion.

It came to pass that these young men both set their affections upon the same lady; and, she being as sensible as she was beautiful, it is by no means strange that she, knowing as she did the character of the rivals, decided in favor of Kenneth Kirke.

Bitterly disappointed, Karl Kent secretly swore a terrible oath of vengeance. But the young couple were quietly married, and soon after left the village to seek peace and plenty in the boundless regions of the West.

They settled in Nebraska, and for a time lived a life of quietude, with a beautiful little girl to bless their new home. Nearly three years passed, and in their bliss, the happy couple had forgotten the existence of Karl Kent.

But the latter had by no means forgotten them. Deep in his murderous heart he carefully cherished his revenge, and suddenly the blow came.

Returning one night from his labor, Kenneth Kirke was amazed to find a heap of smoldering ruins where that morning had stood his cozy little home, and upon the ground, her beautiful features distorted by the agonies of death, lay his beloved wife, in a pool of blood, a keen blade quivering in her lifeless breast.

Pinned to her form by the cruel steel, a scrap of paper bore the heartless words: "Compliments of Karl Kent."

Nothing could be seen of the child, which had either perished in the flames, or been borne away by the destroyer.

For a moment the agonized man had glared upon the awful scene; then his tottering reason fell, and with an inarticulate cry he threw himself upon the cold earth.

For days Kenneth Kirke was a raving maniac; but at length his reason again asserted its power, and then it was that he vowed a solemn oath to be revenged upon the fell fiends who had destroyed his home and happiness.

Hurriedly he left the scene of his life-blow, not knowing if he were proceeding in the right direction, for a heavy rain had obliterated every footprint. Neither did he know the number of his enemies—nothing save that Karl Kent was the prime mover, and for him he hunted with the persistence of a bloodhound.

With a calm deliberation he planned his revenge. As his wife had died—a bowie buried in her heart—so should her destroyer perish. Diligently he practiced with this weapon, until he had acquired a skill that was almost supernatural.

And thus, year after year, never halting, never tiring, did the man-hunter search with indefatigable energy for his foe; wandering restlessly from place to place, penetrating to every remote camp that might serve as a dwelling-place for the murderer, but in vain! Karl Kent, like a will-o'-the-wisp, continually evaded his search.

But at last, after many years, in the bustling town of Sylvania, the Knife-King found his game. Seated at a table inside the Red Light saloon, he saw Karl Kent and five companions; and lo! upon his listening ears, as the ruffians recalled old adventures over their vile drinks, came the story of Karl Kent's vengeance.

Thus it was that the Knife-King learned the identity of Kent's accomplices in that deed of blood; overjoyed that his life-search had at last been successful, he carefully marked the features of each man, then withdrew to perfect his scheme for vengeance.

Coming upon the cavern by accident, he determined to make it his head-quarters while his plans were being consummated; and the reader has already seen how the Knife-King struck his

first blow for revenge by smiting Nimble-fingered Nat.

"Three have already fallen," concluded Kenneth Kirke, "for my aim was sure. Now three remain. They are known in Sylvania as Red Sam, Bowie Tom and Karl Kent, the Poker Prince. He, last of all, shall bow in terror before my wrath, and then—my work is over."

He finished, and stood with folded arms, his dusky eyes flashing with a vengeful fire. To Hurricane Kit, who had been an attentive listener, he seemed almost godlike in his wild grandeur.

"Friend," impressively uttered the Knife-King, after a minute of unbroken silence, "you have now heard my story, for the first time told to mortal ears. Tell me, what think you of the Knife-King? Do you indorse my deeds or condemn them?"

For answer, Hurricane Kit impulsively clasped the avenger's hand.

"Kenneth Kirke," he exclaimed, earnestly, "you have my heartfelt sympathy. Pardon me if I spoke at first too hastily. I only wish the Doomed Six had more than one life to sacrifice, that your vengeance might be still more gratifying. But, if I may ask, when your revenge is complete—when the last of the Doomed Six has fallen before your arm—what then?"

A bitter, reckless smile swept athwart the face of the Knife-King.

"What then?" he echoed, sadly. "Ah! I care not what. Life has no charms for me, for I live only for vengeance; that once consummated, my work is done."

His aspect was so gloomy and forbidding that Kit did not care to cause fresh emotion by further questioning; besides, the intrepid youth was eager to return to the town and get even with the Poker Prince for his recent little attentions. Accordingly, he made known his desires to his host.

"It is well," said the latter. "You are brave to thus beard the lion in his lair—I admire your courage. Follow me!"

He led the way through a tortuous passage that ran from the underground chamber, and soon they emerged into the open air. It was broad daylight, and the sun was shining brightly.

As Hurricane Kit issued from the mouth of the tunnel he gave a start of surprise, for the place wore a decidedly familiar look. Yes, it was the very spot where he had been saved from the fangs of the grizzly bear.

Kenneth Kirke stood at the mouth of the passage, and pointed down the valley with one long finger.

"Go," he exclaimed, "for yonder lies Sylvania. There are your foes and mine. May victory be yours, friend, but remember! harm not the survivors of the Doomed Six, for they are mine—mine—MINE!"

With a wild laugh, the Knife-King disappeared, and Hurricane Kit leisurely retraced his steps in the direction of the mining-camp—back to fresh scenes of blood and strife.

CHAPTER VIII.

PLOTS AND PLOTTERS.

"PARDS, this thing are a burnin' shame, an' no mistake about it, either."

The scene was the private room of the Red Light, and the speaker was burly Tom Tanker, the redoubtable proprietor thereof.

Around him were gathered over a score of fellow drink-dispensers, comprising the shining lights of Sylvania; and from the look of dogged determination depicted upon each luminous phiz, it was evident that this meeting was of no little importance.

"Yas, boys," the saloon-keeper repeated, excitedly, "it are a confounded shame. Here's us, poor, hard-workin' fellers, what hev growed up with ther berg, an' as a natural consequence feel interested in her welfare; honest, law-abidin' cits, every one of us, who hev riz from ther bottom by sheer hard work an' perseverance. An' now, jest as we hev got whar we kin make er tolerable good livin' along cums this slick little galoot from Denver, an' sticks up his new-fangled fandango—skatin' rink, he calls it, er sum other heathenish cognomen. Durn his ugly pictur! Et makes me feel that ugly I could chow up ther bullshebang at a gulp, gal an' all."

Cocktail Bob, another whisky-slinger, gave a snort of disgust.

"It beats ther Dutch how the dod-rotted thing hes caught on hyar," he growled. "Not a durned man turned up over at my place last night; an' so I shet up shop an' went over ter see what it was thet attracted ther boys so mightily. Durned if it didn't seem ter me that

ev'ry galoot in town war packed into that thar shanty, like sardines in a box."

"Yas," put in One-Armed Pete, "an' never did I clap my two optics onter sich er piece ov unadulterated foolishness. It war a p'ison shame ter see so many good men gone wrong; sprawlin', shippin', standin' on their heads, tryin' ter plow up ther floor with their noses, an' cuttin' up more unseemly capers than a clown in a circus. Ugh! It made me tired."

"Ter my eyes," remarked another barkeeper, indignantly, "it seemed like a lunatic asylum on a large scale. An' taer worst o' the hull biz was thet ther durn chumps hed ther unearthly gall to sell lickin' fer less than us. Jest think o' that, feller cits! Ten cents a glass, an' a durn sight poorer stuff, at that."

A universal groan of indignation told that the others shared the opinion of the speaker.

"But that ain't all," declared Sober Sim. "That gal is what 'll draw the boys, after they hev got sick o' breakin' their bones on them t'arnal rollin' machines. She's purty as a pictur', an' half the boys in camp are clean gone on her a'ready. But, fur's I'm concerned, they kin hev her an' welcome. Once I got struck on a red-headed Eastern gal, an' up an' married her. That's the reason, gents, that I'm now hyar a-jugglin' whisky-bottles."

And so the remarks continued, each man having a more or less lengthy argument against Malchi Moore's new institution.

"There's no use talkin'," at length declared the proprietor of the Red Light. "That Denver cuss was sent hyar by Old Nick a-purpose to cheat us out ov our hard-earned livin', an' if ther thing holds out ther way it begun, I reckon we'll be well-nigh bu'sted in a week. Somethin' hez got ter be done at once."

"But what kin we do?"

"Walk up ter the shebang, an' shoot ev'ry mother's son o' the rinkers," suggested Cocktail Bob, recklessly.

But Tom Tanker shook his head decidedly.

"Nix; we don't want ter shed more blood than necessary. Besides, you see, it might cause trouble, for old Moore has a'ready made a good many friends among our soft-headed cits. I've got a better idee nor that."

"Spit'er out, Tom!"

"Wal, pard, if this feller suddenly found himself without a rink to rinklein, he'd be purty apt to git discouraged, an' move on ter the next town, wouldn't he?"

"Yas."

"A good idee, Tom."

"It's ther best plan I know of," supplemented Tanker, "an' if worked on the quiet, we are bound ter succeed."

"But how'll we git rid o' the shanty—blow'er up with dynamight?"

"I'll tell yer. 'Bout fifty ov us—we kin get plenty o' fellers ter the shebang to-night, leavin' about a dozen outside. When the time comes for action, we'll get up a row between ourselves, put out the lights, an' raise a he-old racket generally. In the excitement it will be easy for the boys outside to interjuce a few torches ter ther walls. Nobody'll think o' tryin' ter put out the fire, an' the old shell will be a heap of ashes inside o' twenty minutes. How's the idee strike ye?"

Tom Tanker's plan met with universal approval, for all were anxious to get even with the strangers whom they considered to be in a fair way of ruining their business.

"Glad you're suited with ther scheme, boys," declared the proprietor of the Red Light. "If the rink stands to-morrow mornin', it won't be my fault. Walk up, everybody, an' let's drink to success."

The next moment the gurgle of liquor, in rapid transit down thirsty throats, was the only sound that disturbed the silence of the room.

An hour afterward a second consultation was being held within the limits of Sylvania. Within a cabin on the outskirts of the camp, the same in fact that had served as Hurricane Kit's temporary prison, sat three men, who were easily recognizable as Karl Kent, the Poker Prince, and Red Sam and Bowie Tom, his two red-handed satellites. Upon the rough table beside them was placed a black bottle, the contents of which they sampled semi-occasionally.

The two ruffians were uneasy; their very actions, their very look, were evidence of the fact. And even the placid face of the Sylvania tiger had lost its customary serenity.

Truth to tell, Karl Kent was exceedingly ill at ease; but why he could not tell.

Over him hung a vague sense of coming evil, and ever in his thoughts were Hurricane Kit and the mysterious Knife-King.

"Boys," he was saying, "I sent for you to converse upon matters that interest you as well as myself."

"All right, cap'n," chimed in Bowie Tom. "We're all ears, as ther jackass said."

"Don't joke; I don't feel like it, to-day. Boys, I tell you there is danger in the air. I know it; I feel it in my very bones. Of its nature I have but a vague idea; but, boys, I'd give a cool thousand to know who this mysterious knife-thrower is."

The "boys" shook their heads dubiously. "You'll never find out by us, Cap," declared Red Sam.

"I'll tell you the idea that struck me last night," continued the Poker Prince, in a low voice. "You will perhaps remember a day some fifteen years ago, when we did a little job back in Nebraska for an old rival of mine—his name was Kenneth Kirke."

The ruffians nodded; they readily recalled the incident.

"Well," went on the gambler, "something has occurred to me as being rather singular. There were six of us there, you will remember; and those who have suffered at the hands of this so-called avenger were three of the six!"

The two ruffians exchanged startled glances. "It can't be that the avenger is Kenneth Kirke," gasped Bowie Tom in dismay.

"Unlikely; still possible," returned the Poker Prince, impressively.

"Then," ejaculated Red Sam, whose pallid face betrayed his agitation, "if that is the case, we three are the survivors of the Doomed Six of Sylvania."

"That is my supposition," said Karl Kent. "Cowardly or not, I'd give every cent I own to be this minute on the other side of the ocean."

"I reckon the proper caper is to levant," assented Sam.

"Puckachee!" advised his comrade.

"To-morrow's sun shall find me far away from this accursed camp," said Karl Kent, decidedly. "But before I go, there is some work cut out to do. Will you stick to me?"

"Through thick and thin."

"Then listen: You have seen the girl who created such a sensation at the rink last night—Minetta, the roller queen?"

"You bet."

"Well, to come right to the point, I am struck on this dashing young miss, and have determined that, when I leave this classic burg forever, the charming Minetta shall bear me company."

The ruffians nodded approvingly.

"A grand idea, cap'n," declared Bowie Tom, "but how in the name o' Tophet shall we work the leetle racket?"

"Listen! I have just learned that there is a plot on foot to destroy the rink to-night. The saloon-keepers are at the bottom of it, and will send a gang to raise a disturbance, while at the same time a second party will fire the building from the outside."

"Now, I want you to pick a dozen good fellows whom you can trust, and be on hand in readiness for action. Keep as near as possible to Minetta, and, when the row begins, seize her and make a dash for the door. Do you understand?"

"We have it booked," said Red Sam, significantly tapping his brow, "an' we'll do our level best."

"Good. Remember, everything depends upon you. Once get your clutches on the girl, and I am confident that, in the excitement, we can slip away in the darkness unobserved. This accomplished, the morning will find us on the royal road to safety—far from Sylvania and that accursed man with the knife."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Wild and weird the laughter pealed upon the ears of the three startled plotters, who looked inquiringly at one another in a state of dread expectancy.

Sudden and swift as a rifle-ball, came a white object across the room, and Red Sam sunk from his chair to the floor with a gurgling cry, the life-blood spurting from his breast in a crimson tide.

And, pinned there by the deadly blade, a scrap of paper bore the legend:

"Number Four."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Again the insane laugh rung out, and glancing instinctively toward the window, the two survivors beheld for the first time for fifteen years the face of the Knife-King!

"Kenneth Kirke, by heavens!" gasped the Poker Prince, and then, in a fit of desperation, he plucked a revolver from his belt, and fired

once—twice—thrice at the spectral face in the window.

Once more the mocking laugh, as the avenger suddenly disappeared; and, insane with fury, Karl Kent dashed to the door.

The street was thronged with men, but nothing could be seen of the Knife-King. He had vanished in the crowd!

CHAPTER IX.

THE MAJOR'S WOOING.

"Oh, father, what a delightful morning it is! Do let me go out for a short walk. I am so tired of being shut up in this miserable apology for a room. Say yes, please, father!"

The speaker was Minetta Moore, the fair queen of skaters, and she sat in her apartment at the hotel, gazing wistfully out of the narrow window upon the wildly beautiful landscape.

Naturally of a blithe and cheerful disposition, the maiden chafed under the restraint to which her prudent sire had subjected her upon arriving at the mining-camp.

"Oh, please, father!"

The voice was soft and pleading, and Malachi Moore, standing in the open doorway, hesitated.

The man who hesitates is lost. The supplicant maiden asserted her power, and the rink-owner yielded.

"Yes, Minetta, you may go out for an hour or two," he consented. "I admit that the fresh air and change of scene will undoubtedly do you good. But be careful not to go out of sight of the town; this is not Denver, and there are many dangers to be carefully avoided."

Minetta uttered a silvery laugh.

"Don't fret about me, father," she exclaimed. "I shall heed your advice and not wander far away. Good-by!"

"Good-by! and remember, daughter, I shall be in a continual state of worry until you return."

"Nonsense, father!"

Hastily throwing on a jaunty little hat, Minetta tripped gayly down the rickety stairs into the street. As fresh and lovely as a dew-kissed rose she seemed as she walked lightly along, like a long-imprisoned bird rejoicing in its new-found freedom.

Everybody abroad had an admiring glance to bestow upon the sprightly little figure of the roller queen; but there was one observer who was more than ordinarily interested.

Clarence the Major, airy floor-manager of Malachi Moore, stood upon the steps of the skating-rink, with his thumbs in the arm-holes of his vest and his hat tipped upon one ear, as he meditatively chewed upon a toothpick for want of more solid refreshment.

Like Othello, his occupation was gone—until evening came again; but this fact did not in the least disturb the Major's serenity. Time never hung very heavily upon his hands.

Yet it was evident, from the gloomy frown that had settled over the brow of the dapper youth, that his mind was grappling with some gigantic problem.

Anon the classic brow lifted, and the Major gave a vigorous gesture.

"By the great club of Hercules, I'll endure this suspense no longer," he hissed, tragically.

"This sense of vague uncertainty, if it continues, will soon bust my aching heart. I've set my valuable affections on this lovely damsel, an' if I want to succeed I must lose no time in chinning here to myself. Life is mighty uncertain, anyhow, and I guess I know enough to make hay while the sun shines."

"Verily, will I seize upon the earliest opportunity to gain the ear of my fair damsel, and then will I pour out my tale of adoration at her lovely feet. Yea, I will attack her heart's stronghold with love's shining arrows for my weapons, and for my watchword 'Minetta or Death.'"

And with this stern resolution, Clarence the Major assumed a striking attitude, fiercely twirling the ends of his waxed mustache with his dainty fingers.

"A-a-ah!"

An inexpressible sound, somewhat resembling the tearing of cloth, seemed to suddenly issue from the young man's very boots; it might have been the breaking strings of his bleeding heart.

For lo! from the hotel issued the lovely creature who had so completely upset the Major's peace of mind.

"Ah! 'tis she, 'tis she, the object of my affections," breathed the youth, melodramatically. "Sit still, my palpitating heart, sit still!"

In an ecstasy of delight, he watched the dainty figure trip gayly down the dusty street.

"Now is my time," he thought, "this is the golden opportunity for which I have been sighing. Now will I learn my fate!"

With his lips compressed with firm resolve, Clarence the Major descended the steps and walked in the direction taken by the skating queen.

He started out with the grim determination to do or die; but as he found himself rapidly drawing nearer to the object of his admiration, he felt his courage slowly cozing out at his fingertips.

Clarence the Major was possessed of cheek enough to carry him through most every predicament with flying colors, but this was an occasion that would try the nerves of the majority of men, no matter how brave they might be.

The enormity of his self-appointed task now began to dawn upon the mind of the love-sick floor manager, and he heartily wished that the ordeal was over.

He was even tempted to stop and give up entirely, but the holder spirit within him caused him to banish this thought, and summon up fresh courage for the occasion.

"Hang it all," was his disgusted exclamation. "This is a pretty kettle of fish. Here I am just a-dying to pour out my troubled heart, and I'll be eternally smashed if I can think of what to say to break the ice. Bless my boots if I ain't as shaky as an old maid with the ague."

Thus musing, anxious yet diffident, the perplexed major stalked moodily along behind the lightly tripping roller queen. He longed to walk up to her side, but for the life of him he could not think of a word to say. However, Fortune saw fit to smile upon the Major and open a way out of his difficulty.

By this time Minetta Moore had strayed a considerable distance from the camp, which was hidden from view by a sharp turn in the gulch.

Suddenly, to the youth's discomfiture, the girl seated herself upon a moss-grown rock beneath a spreading tree, becoming for the first time aware of the proximity of another person.

Clarence the Major was in for it now. He must either pause or keep straight on past her, so with a desperate attempt to screw up his courage, he approached the spot where Minetta was smilingly waiting.

"A pleasant morning, Miss Moore!" he blurted, at the same time removing his hat with awkward fingers, while he felt his face turn the color of a boiled lobster.

The maiden looked up into his face with a rueful smile.

"Why, you startled me," she exclaimed. "I entertained an idea that I was all alone. What brings you here, Mr.—Mr.—? Well, I declare, I do not know your name, but if I mistake not you are my father's floor-manager."

"Call me Clarence, miss, if you please," ventured the Major. "Never mind the other name—Clarence is good enough for me. Yes, miss," he went on, "I have the honor of serving your respected parent in the capacity of floor-manager. It is strange you should have entertained any doubt upon the subject, for it was I who escorted you upon the floor, where you electrified the men of Sylvania with your wonderful exhibition of grace and skill."

"Indeed, I had quite forgotten it. I was so frightened at finding myself with such wild surroundings, that I did not notice any one in particular. And so you are the gentleman that the audience were laughing at so heartily? I am real glad to meet you, Mr. Clarence. Do sit down!"

Clarence the Major did not exactly relish this allusion to his unpleasant accident, but he concealed his momentary displeasure beneath a wreath of smiles, and accepted the proffered seat with alacrity.

"Believe me, dear miss, this is the happiest moment of my life, thus privileged to sit here beside you," he earnestly declared, with the most elaborate bow he could muster for the occasion.

Minetta Moore received the compliment with a bewitching smile.

She was a thorough child of the world, an incorrigible coquette, and summing up Clarence the Major at once as a youth who possessed more sentiment than sense, she saw a glorious opportunity for a little innocent diversion.

Artfully she led him on, enchanting the giddy-headed floor-manager with her bewitching smile and silvery tongue.

And Clarence the Major, now that the ice was fairly broken, chattered away like a parrot; his tongue could wag glibly enough when he felt perfectly at his ease.

Thus gayly talking and laughing, the couple heeded not the rapid flight of time.

"Mr. Clarence," said the roller queen, a length, "it seems to me that you are slightly out of your sphere in Sylvania. Here every one else is rough and ill-mannered, but you have a degree of refinement that would make you a peer in the best of society. This is not your place."

This was laying it on thick, but, of course, the Major swallowed it all with an infinite relish.

"Yes, miss," he said, proudly. "I belong to one of the best families of New York, and was once the equal of any man in that big city; but the waves of adversity engulfed me, driving me hither and thither with the remorselessness of fate, until I am now what you see me, an aimless adventurer on this broad earth."

He might have mentioned that the time when fortune frowned upon him he was cashier in a wholesale house; but Clarence the Major did not choose to go too deep into particulars.

"How sad!" sighed Minetta. "But, Clarence, it is never too late to mend. Why not leave this God-forsaken place, and begin life anew in a place where your talents will be appreciated?"

A light of desperate resolve suddenly gleamed in the eyes of the adventurer.

"You ask me why I don't seek a new existence, and in reply let me tell you something," he exclaimed. "Before you came here I cared not where I laid my head; I hated every place and everybody. But now it is different; in Sylvania will I remain as long as your angelic presence graces it."

"Why, Mr. Clarence! How absurd!"

"Minetta, I am not joking; I speak from the very depths of my palpitating heart. I loved you from the very moment I first feasted my eyes upon your lovely face—I adore you; I worship the very earth over which your fairy feet have trod. Minetta, I would fight for you—yes, die for you! Speak! I implore you, and tell me if there is any hope of my love being reciprocated. Speak, fair Minetta!"

And as he finished his flowery address, Clarence the Major suddenly dropped upon his knees, heedless that the action was fraught with ruin to his light-colored pantaloons, and with clasped hands and eager, anxious eyes, looked pleadingly up into the face of his beautiful listener.

So abrupt and startling was this tableau, so earnest seemed the youth in his entreaty, that the lovely roller queen sat speechless, impressed in spite of herself, and not knowing what to do or say.

There was a brief but awkward pause, that was broken in a manner both startling and unpleasant.

From above their heads suddenly came a low, ominous snarling cry; and glancing upward in alarm, the couple saw the tawny shape of a large beast crouching upon an overarching limb.

Both knew enough of the West and its wild denizens, to recognize this animal as a panther, the great mountain lion of North America.

At sight of the fierce beast, with his fiery eyes glowering upon her, Minetta Moore uttered a low scream, while the sallow face of Clarence the Major turned pale with terror.

This was a most unpleasant termination to his wooing, to have the panther appear at the critical moment when he was about to learn his destiny. Surely, ill luck was his.

But the only thoughts of the floor-manager just then were to get out of danger; with shaking limbs he rose to his feet.

"It's a painter, miss!" he exclaimed, excitedly. "We must run or we shall be destroyed. Follow me!"

He did not realize that the maiden was fairly paralyzed with fear, and incapable of speech or action.

Neither did he stop to use the daintily-mounted revolver so ostentatiously displayed upon his hip.

Clarence the Major stood not upon the order of his going, but went at once.

"Minetta, I would fight for you—yes, die for you!" he had declared, but his actions did not seem to be consistent with his speech. His coat tails cut the air like a knife, as he made the dust fly promiscuously in the direction of the mining-camp.

As he fled the coward was followed by a mocking laugh.

Crack!—crack!—crack! Sharp and spiteful, three reports rung out upon the air, so swiftly that the last two seemed but echoes of the first; and the panther, then about to spring upon its victim, fell spasmodically struggling at the feet of the unconscious roller queen.

CHAPTER X.

BOWIE TOM IS BAFFLED.

As the last shot died away a young man, still holding a smoking revolver in his hand, leaped into view.

It was Hurricane Kit.

Always on hand, the adventurer, just returning from the retreat of the Knife-King, had happened upon the scene just in time to catch the part of protector that should have been taken by cowardly Clarence the Major.

It needed but a single glance to convince Kit that his weapon had done its work well; the cougar was past harming any one, and the youth at once turned his attention to the girl whom his opportune arrival had delivered from a terrible fate.

The roller queen, with pallid face, reclined against the mossy bowlder; the excitement had overtaken her nerves, and she had swooned.

From the stream near by Hurricane Kit brought some water, utilizing his hat for a dipper, and abruptly dashed it into her face, with excellent effect.

Her senses roused by this impromptu shower-bath, the girl opened her eyes with a sudden start.

"Where am I?" she inquired, staring about her bewilderedly.

Then her eyes fell upon the outstretched body of the defunct cougar.

"Ah! yes; I remember it all now," she muttered, and turned away her eyes with a shudder.

"You are safe enough now, miss; so do not be alarmed," Hurricane Kit hastened to assure her. "The painter is as cold as powder and lead can make him. I guess it is lucky for you, miss, that I happened along as I did, for had you relied solely upon that cowardly companion of yours for assistance, I am afraid the result would have been far different."

"Oh! sir, I shall never forget your kindness. You have saved me from a horrible death, and it is to you that I owe my life."

"Pray say nothing more about it, miss," interposed Kit. "Surely no one with half a heart would think of leaving a fellow-being in danger, unless he were an arrant coward like that fellow Clarence the Major."

A look of scorn swept over the face of the roller queen.

"His actions this morning have proved his courage nicely," said she. "Why, if you believe it, the cowardly fellow had the audacity to make love to me, vowing to give up his life for me, and everything of that kind. Oh! it was altogether too rich for anything. The very idea!"

Hurricane Kit smiled amusedly.

"I hope you'll pardon me for my presumption," he said, "but the truth is I heard every word that passed between you. Chancing to overhear a portion of the gay and festive youth's flowery speech, I was tempted to regale myself by listening to the sequel. In truth, I cannot blame Clarence the Major for his feelings, for if I am not mistaken you are the dashing roller queen who has set all Sylvania wild with admiration. No wonder the Major was affected!"

Minetta blushed prettily at the compliment. "You have not mistaken my identity, sir," said she, "but I do not remember having met you before. You are—?"

"One who has experienced considerable trouble on your account, miss," returned the rover with a bitter smile. "Hurricane Kit, at your service."

"Indeed! Then you are the person who was arrested as the one who shot at me in the rink last night, and who was afterward spirited away by parties unknown?"

"The description fits me to a T."

"Father told me about it when I recovered. He did not believe you guilty, and was using his influence to have you set at liberty when the news came that you had suddenly disappeared. I am so glad that you are safe and sound after all your peril."

"My enemies meant well enough," said Hurricane Kit, grimly. "If they had been permitted to continue their amusement one minute longer, I should now be dangling at the end of a hempen rope; but Fate was kind, so I am still on deck, making my way back to Sylvania and my foes. Do you return now?"

Minetta did; her morning walk had already extended to nearly midday, and she felt that she had obtained quite enough exercise for a while. So she declared her intention of returning at once.

Accordingly their steps were turned in the direction of the camp; and as she went, the coquettish roller queen used her tongue with all

the art she could summon for the occasion. She was struck by the handsome face of the bold young rover, and determined that, in turn, he should become a captive to her charms.

But she did not know the nature of the man by her side. Warm-hearted and impulsive, Hurricane Kit could still be as frigid as an iceberg, and steel his heart against the attack of any woman if so inclined.

He listened smilingly to the glib speech of his fair companion, but it had no more effect upon him than the breeze that gently caressed his cheeks of bronze.

It was noon when they entered the camp, and scarcely a man was abroad.

Kit escorted the skating queen to the hotel, where Malachi Moore was impatiently awaiting her return.

"I shall be delighted to cultivate your acquaintance, Mr. Carroll," softly said Minetta, as she gave him her hand at parting. "Pray, call at your earliest convenience."

"I shall probably be at the rink this evening," answered the rover, as, lifting his hat, he turned and walked away.

"Humph!" he continued to himself. "Now that I am acquainted with the celebrated queen of the rollers, I believe that I shall not fall head over heels in love with her as that crazy simpleton of a floor-manager has done. She is both beautiful and entertaining, I'll admit, but dangerously so; a born flirt at heart, a very spitfire when aroused, and the man who is discreet will be careful how he fools around such a powder-magazine."

Thus soliloquizing, Hurricane Kit made his way along the street.

He entertained some doubts as to what his reception would be at the hands of the Sylvanians. It was his opinion that many of the cits believed him guiltless of the attempted crime for which he had been seized the night before, still he knew that the Poker Prince mustered a large number of ruffians, who would do their utmost to turn public sentiment against him.

However, the dauntless young man did not borrow much trouble on this score. Cool and determined as ever, he had made up his mind to go back to Sylvania and take things as they came; and there he was.

Reaching the Red Light, the scene of his initiatory unpleasantness with Karl Kent, he without hesitation pushed open the door and entered.

The saloon was filled with men, engaged in talking over the various exciting events of the past twenty-four hours.

The Poker Prince was not there, but his subordinate, burly Bowie Tom, was conspicuous, together with a choice array of his boon companions.

And now the topic that agitated the worthy cits was the disappearance of Hurricane Kit.

As a matter of policy, the men most intimately concerned in this affair had kept their own counsel; so that to the rest it was a matter of conjecture who had spirited him away.

"I'd give an ounce of dust to know where he is, and who helped him to pucker," declared a miner; and Bowie Tom, whose evil brain was constantly at work, seized this opportunity to advance a theory.

"I'll be darned if I don't think that him an' that tarnal knife critter are in cahoots," he averred. "You'll allow that they both appeared to us about the same time, and things ha' b'en mixed up promiscuous like, ever since. It's my opinion that ther Knife-King knows where the young galoot is, an' vicy-versy."

And many of those who heard him were inclined to believe the same way, especially Bowie Tom's own clique.

"Anyhow," said one grizzled old miner, "if Hurricane Kit is alive, I reckon he won't hev cheek enuff ter cum foolin' round these diggin's. Ther climate is too hot for him."

But ere the laugh that followed this remark had died away, the door swung open, and in walked the subject of their conversation.

"Talk o' the Ole Nick an' he allers pops up in sight," muttered a miner under his breath.

Hurricane Kit strode in as unconcerned as if nothing had happened, and coolly surveyed the surprised occupants of the room.

"Good-afternoon, gentlemen! You see I am back again, safe and sound," he exclaimed, with the utmost sangfroid.

It was fully half a minute before any one ventured to make a reply, so taken aback were they at the sudden reappearance of the young adventurer.

Bowie Tom was the first man to make a movement.

"Curse you," he growled, springing to his

feet, "it was mighty unlucky for you that you come back ag'in, you infernal gal-killer. I s'pose now you've got your friend, the Knife-King, a-waitin' outside fur a chance ter slash somebody. Boys, if you value your lives, get onto this cowardly skunk. String him up to the nearest limb!"

Thus appealed Karl Kent's satellite, in well-simulated indignation, and at the command fully a score of burly ruffians bounded to their feet with a will.

Pistols were drawn and knives flashed wickedly in the sunlight, as the gang advanced threateningly toward Hurricane Kit.

With a lightning-like bound, the latter swiftly gained a position with his back to the wall, and the next instant a pair of glittering revolvers frowned threateningly upon the advancing crowd.

His manner was as cool as ever, his face still wore the careless smile; but in his dusky eyes there was a steely glitter that warned Bowie Tom and his cronies not to be too rash.

Not liking the aspect of the deadly tubes that stared them in the face, the ruffians paused abruptly.

"Steady, there!" commanded Hurricane Kit, authoritatively. "I'd advise you not to be too venturesome, for the first man who advances another step will receive enough lead to last him through purgatory. Take warning!"

There was a brief silence. Instinctively, the ruffians looked to Bowie Tom for instructions.

But the latter, though he knew that his defiant foe could eventually be overpowered by mere force, hesitated about giving the order, for he was aware that death lurked within those grim revolvers, and that he, himself, was liable to receive one of the fatal billets.

Therefore he paused in indecision, until the trouble suddenly assumed a new and unexpected phase.

A stalwart, grizzly-bearded miner suddenly walked to the side of Hurricane Kit, cocking his revolvers.

"I reckon this one-sided bulldozin' biz hez gone fur enuff, Bowie Tom," he declared, emphatically. "If thar's a scrimmage on the tapis, I fight on the youngster's side."

"And I!"

To Hurricane Kit's great surprise and relief, fully a dozen men, stout and well-armed, followed the miner's example, and ranged themselves by his side, grim and determined.

At this new turn of affairs the ruffians wavered, while Bowie Tom could only disgustedly grunt:

"Wal, I'll be durned!"

A smile of triumph wreathed the lips of Hurricane Kit.

"Bowie Tom," he said, with the most provoking coolness, "you may be ordinarily smart, but for once in your life you have overreached yourself, and bitten off more than you can chew. You can perceive that I have a few friends in this classic camp, after all, and unless you wish to figure prominently in a first-class funeral, I advise you and your cut-throat gang to pucker up."

The majority of Bowie Tom's backers were evidently of the opinion that was the best course to pursue under the circumstances, though the master-spirit himself still stood in sulky indecision.

"Come!" cried Hurricane Kit, sternly, after a brief pause. "I'll give you just twenty seconds to make yourselves scarce. If there's one of you here at the expiration of that time, I shall proceed to open fire."

There was no doubt that the youth would put his threat into execution, and surly Bowie Tom hesitated no longer.

"Euchered, by thunder!" he ejaculated, in deep disgust. "Come, boys! This hyar is no place for peaceable men like us. Let's vamoose."

With scowling faces, the baffled gang lost no time in getting out of range of their opponents' weapons.

Once more the plans of the Poker Prince's party had met with an ignominious defeat, and again Hurricane Kit had triumphed.

CHAPTER XI.

OPENING THE BALL.

HURRICANE KIT put away his revolvers with a grim smile of satisfaction. He had pulled through this difficulty far easier than he had expected.

"Gentlemen," he exclaimed, turning to those who still remained in the saloon, "I am very much obliged for your friendship in the late little unpleasantness. When a fellow is a stranger in

a strange land, he knows how to appreciate a friend. What's your beverage, gents?"

He nodded toward the bar as he spoke, and quickly added:

"I seldom drink the stuff myself, but I shall be pleased to have you all moisten your throats a little at my expense."

Hurricane Kit knew the secret of Western popularity. That invitation to drink did more to bind the friendship of these eccentric miners than if he had distributed a handful of gold eagles among them.

Nearly a score of brawny men ranged themselves promptly beside the bar, and over their brimming glasses mutually declared that Kit was the finest fellow who had ever deigned to honor Sylvania with his presence.

The adventurer was naturally well pleased at the turn affairs had taken.

It was a victory of no small importance in thus gaining the good-will and backing of even such a small proportion of the citizens.

He felt that, now this was achieved, his popularity would rapidly spread; and with the dreaded Knife-King for another powerful ally, Kit experienced but little concern as to how his trouble with the Poker Prince would terminate.

The young rover did not tarry in the Red Light any longer than was consistent with good policy.

After his rough-and-tumble experience of the past two days, Kit sadly felt the need of rest and quiet, and accordingly determined that his next act would be to seek out a place where he could enjoy a period of hearty sleep unmolested.

Soon leaving the Red Light, the young man repaired to the hotel, where he had no difficulty in engaging a room.

It was a roughly-finished, unpretentious apartment, but Kit cared nothing for style just then, and it suited his purpose as well as the finest parlor would have done.

Securely fastening the door, he threw himself upon the couch and was soon wrapped in refreshing slumber.

He slept the sound sleep of one who has long been deprived of his much-needed repose.

When Hurricane Kit at length awoke, bright and refreshed, he found to his surprise that he was in utter darkness.

The day was flown, and night had long since flung her mantle over the slumbering earth—scarcely slumbering, either, as far as Sylvania was concerned, for noisy shouts and inspiring strains of music told that Malachi Moore's skating rink was once more in full blast, and that the exhilarated miners were enjoying themselves at the top of their bent.

Hurricane Kit started to his feet with a bound.

"Jerusalem! I have slept, and no mistake," was his muttered exclamation.

Hastily consulting his watch, the youth saw that it was nearly ten o'clock—the time when Queen Minetta would appear.

Without loss of time, Kit left his apartment and descended into the street.

The moon had concealed her face behind a bank of inky clouds, and the darkness was almost impenetrable; but the blazing lights of the skating rink served as an all-sufficient beacon to guide him on his way.

Hurrying along the street, Hurricane Kit suddenly uttered a sharp exclamation of surprise, as he struck some object in his path, and fell headlong to the earth.

Somewhat confused by this unforeseen occurrence, the youth, ruefully rubbing his battered shins, picked himself up; and as he did so, a low moan, as of one in mortal agony, burst upon his startled ears.

Then he comprehended that the cause of his downfall was the prostrate body of a human being.

"Some infernal idiot who has imbibed a drop too much of Moore's tanglefoot," was Kit's instant thought.

Yet he took pains to strike a match, and, stooping, held it above the prostrate form. Then it was that he gave a start of wonder, for the flickering flame of the match revealed to him the sallow features of Clarence the Major.

His face was pale and haggard, and a livid mark upon his temple led the observer to believe that he had been struck by some heavy implement.

"Humph!" said Hurricane Kit. "There has evidently been foul play here. Let me see if I can do anything for the festive floor-manager. I may get some information that will be of interest."

Lifting the unconscious Major in his arms as though he were but a child, the stalwart young man strode back to where Tom Tanker's red light hissed and spluttered in the endeavor to relieve the surrounding gloom. Throwing open the door, Kit entered bearing his human burden.

As he had anticipated, the saloon was entirely destitute of patrons; and the sole occupant was the burly proprietor, whose gloomy face was ever and anon brightened by a savage smile, as he thought of the surprises that the night would bring.

"I've got a dead man here that I would like to bring to life," announced Hurricane Kit, carelessly. "I s'pose you have no objections?"

Tom Tanker surlily declared that he cared not a copper what took place in his establishment, so long as he received his pay for it; and with this reminder, Kit passed on into the next room with his burden.

Depositing the form of the luckless Major upon the floor, he quickly procured a glass of Tanker's fiery mixture, rewarding that worthy with a shining eagle, the sight of which served in a degree to relax his surly countenance.

Returning to Clarence the Major, the youth forced the contents of the glass down his throat, and then waited patiently for the result.

He had not long to wait. Revived by the powerful liquor, Clarence the Major soon opened his eyes, and stared bewilderedly up into the face of his benefactor.

"Oh! my head, how it whirls around!" he exclaimed, raising one trembling hand to his temple. "Where am I? Where— Oh! yes; I remember it all now. They struck me down and left me— Minetta, oh! Minetta, I must save you!"

Incoherently the words were jerked from the lips of the sport, as he struggled to his feet and made a dash for the door.

But Hurricane Kit was on the alert, and his muscular arm restrained further flight on the part of Clarence the Major.

"Don't get excited, my friend," he advised quietly. "Take things easy, and enlighten my anxious mind upon a point or two; not pay me for my attention to you by skipping off like a jack-rabbit. How did you come to be stretched on your back out yonder, and what means all this rumpus about Minetta? Speak!"

Clarence the Major looked cunningly at his interlocutor.

"That depends," he averred. "Are you a friend of her's?"

"I am a friend to all who deserve the friendship of an honest man. In fact, it was I who saved her from death this morning, while a chap of about your size and complexion was practicing go-as-you-please racing in the direction of the camp."

The Major winced visibly under this thrust, and his pale face flushed with the shame that he could not conceal.

"I'll admit I made a fool of myself then," he acknowledged. "I was excited then; but now Minetta is in greater danger, and I must retrieve my ill fortune, and show her that I am not such a coward after all. I—"

"My good fellow," impatiently interrupted Hurricane Kit, "pray do not wander round Robin Hood's barn, but come to the point at once. What is the nature of this terrible danger that menaces the roller queen?"

"Listen!"

And Clarence the Major hastened to explain as rapidly as his excitement would permit.

It seems that he had spent the day secluded, in communion with his own bitter thoughts, heartily ashamed of his cowardice, and retreating into the presence of the roller queen for her father; and when the time came for the rink to open, its genial floor-manager still failed to put in his appearance. Feeling that Minetta had acquainted her father with full particulars of the affair, Clarence the Major could not summon courage to meet the rink-owner's wrath, which he anticipated would be showered upon his devoted head; and so he wandered disconsolately about in the darkness, with the growing conviction that he was the most infernal donkey in existence.

While thus pacing meditatively along, the Major's ears suddenly caught the subdued hum of voices, seeming to come from a clump of bushes near at hand. Curiosity prompted him to listen, and what he heard filled his soul with horror and indignation. The men were members of the saloon-keepers' party, and they were discussing their satanical plot for burning and plundering the skating-rink.

For a moment Clarence the Major stood as if petrified with amazement, before he could de-

cide what course to pursue. Then he resolved upon a plan of action. He would hasten to the rink, warn Moore of his danger, and thus regain the favor of fair Minetta.

Alas! for the Major. His intentions were excellent, but Fate did not design that he should execute his mission. Moving cautiously away, he stepped upon a dry twig that snapped beneath his weight, and the next moment the roughs were upon him.

A crushing blow from the heavy butt of a revolver, and Clarence the Major lapsed into a state of peaceful oblivion, from which he was aroused by Hurricane Kit's timely exertions.

Such is the substance of the story that the battered floor-manager hurriedly related, and when he had finished Kit, who had been an eager, impatient listener, gave a bound for the door.

"Quick! It is late, but we may yet be in time to help them thwart the accursed scheme," cried he, resolutely. "Are you coming?"

Never pausing to see if the Major was behind him, Hurricane Kit dashed into the main room, and as he did so a startled exclamation escaped his lips.

In his excitement, he had forgotten that Tom Tanker, the villainous ringleader of the anti-rink party, was close at hand.

The latter had overheard the conversation, and now stood in the center of the floor, ready for business, one hand clutching a pistol, while his face wore the grimly-resolute expression of a bull-dog.

"Hold on, thar!" he commanded, as the youth made his appearance. "I advise yer to go slow, an' not mix up with what ain't no part o' yer biz."

Not for a second wavering, Hurricane Kit bounded toward him, drawing a revolver from his belt; but Tanker had the advantage, and, simultaneously with the sharp report of his weapon, the rover fell heavily to the floor.

But he was uninjured; his drop was but a clever ruse, and the bullet whistled above his head, clipping a piece from the ear of Clarence the Major, who, imagining himself mortally wounded, set up a lusty howl.

From the floor where he lay, Hurricane Kit swiftly fired at the barkeeper, who was recocking his piece for another shot. The bullet sped true to its mark, and Tom Tanker went down with a yell of agony.

"Come on!" shouted Kit, and springing over the ruffian's body, he hurried from the saloon.

Clarence the Major followed more slowly, carefully holding his injured ear; as the critical moment approached, he felt his more discreet nature assert itself, and wished himself well out of the coming fracas.

As they emerged into the open air, there came from the direction of the skating rink, a quick rattle of revolvers, followed by the confused shouts of excited men.

The work was commenced.

CHAPTER XII.

A NIGHT OF TERROR.

WITH a countenance beaming with good-humor, as he thought of the snug sum in his pocket resulting from the income of the night before, and with the prospect of an equally good business to follow, Malachi Moore threw open the door of his rink early that eventful evening.

The picture of serenity, he calmly raked the shovels in, little thinking of the devilish plot on foot, that ere midnight would plunge him into gloom and ruin—little imagining that some of the very hands that passed up the price of admission would soon be turned against him and his.

Within, the scene was but a repetition of the evening before, though not quite as many cits were mounted on the "devil's trucks," as they were pleased to call them.

It was noticeable, that many who, upon the previous occasion, had been most ardent devotees of the art skatorial, now were compunctious enough to let the uncertain roller severely alone.

At either end of the rink, and particularly in the vicinity of the bar, a throng of men were congregated; while others were scattered in little groups all along the narrow passage that encircled the skating surface.

Yet there was nothing in their actions that could give the most timid man any grounds for apprehension. They talked and drank good-naturedly among themselves, and poked fun at the suspicionless miners on the floor, who, had they possessed an inkling of the truth, would

have made all haste to part with their clumsy ornaments and renew acquaintance with their trusty sixes.

Malachi Moore, serene and self-satisfied, as he jingled the shining coins in his capacious pockets had no idea of the peril that hovered over him.

Two great plots were in readiness for execution, either of which was sufficient if successful, to plunge him into the deepest misery.

First, the saloon men and their gang, the quietest and most orderly men in the crowd, eagerly waited for the signal that was to begin the work of destruction.

And they were as blissfully ignorant of the existence of a second scheme, as was the proprietor himself; but, nevertheless, the other party, consisting of the Poker Prince and his few picked and trusty men, were early on hand.

Seemingly without any other purpose than to pass away the time, they lounged carelessly about; yet their keen eyes were ever on the alert, and they held themselves in readiness to execute the plans of their employer just as soon as the saloon men might choose to open the ball.

Ignorant of the trouble that was afloat, the cits of Sylvania were enjoying themselves at the top of their bent.

The tactics of the would-be skaters were decidedly erratic, and excited a great amount of sarcasm among the spectators. Suddenly the trio of musicians would start in upon a merry air, and round would clatter the miners, helter-skelter, hurry-kurry, slipping and tumbling hither and thither, until the music ceased; then they would climb laboriously up to the bar, and enthusiastically drink to the new amusement, while they mopped their perspiring faces in preparation for another trial.

There was but one thing wanting. The miners missed the genial floor-manager, Clarence the Major, with his waxed mustache and brightly glittering badge. They longed to greet him with a brotherly caress, and see him reclining gracefully upon the polished floor with his long legs tied in a series of complex knots. But Clarence the Major came not, and the patrons were obliged to swallow their disappointment as best they might.

But they managed to have enough sport among themselves; and so the hours passed swiftly away.

Ten o'clock came, and quickly the floor was cleared of skaters, while all attentively awaited the second appearance of Minetta the fair roller queen.

A moment later the maiden issued unaided from the dressing-room, and with a smiling bow glided gracefully onto the polished surface.

Never did she look more beautiful and bewitching, and as she flitted over the floor like a butterfly, the rough audience showed their appreciation by a burst of applause that fairly made the rafters ring.

Then came a change over the gay and picturesque scene.

Suddenly, above the sound of swelling music and the loud applause of the spectators, rung a shrill and piercing whistle; and then from either end of the rink sounded the spiteful crack of revolvers and the whiz of leaden balls flying swiftly through the air.

Crash! One by one the lights were quickly shattered by missiles sent by unerring hands, until all were extinguished, and the place was wrapped in total darkness.

Then Pandemonium seemed to reign supreme. The rapid crack!—crack! of revolvers, the sound of flying bullets flattening against the walls, the heavy thud of falling bodies, the fierce cries of excited men, helped to make up a scene that, once witnessed, was long to be remembered.

The saloon men's gang, crouching in comparatively secure positions, continually blazed recklessly away into the air, their object being to make the stampede as complete as possible; while the majority of the crowd, bewildered by the Pandemonium that raged about them, savagely fought, pushing and crowding each other in an attempt to reach the open air.

There were some who had not yet taken off their skates; and when they strove to reach the door, forgetting their awkward appendages in the excitement, it was to speedily realize the discomfort of their position; their helplessness was complete, and sprawling upon the floor, they struggled desperately to free themselves from the cumbersome contrivances that ten minutes ago had afforded them such supreme satisfaction.

Suddenly the rope that suspended the impromptu band-stand in mid-air, partially severed by chance bullets, parted at the strain

brought to bear upon the few remaining stands; band-stand, performers and instruments went down with a loud crash upon the struggling crowd, crushing some, and augmenting the demoralization of the remainder.

A brief moment of excitement, but which seemed an hour to the terror-struck occupants of the rink, and then a whistle coming from the outside rung shrilly upon the air.

At the same instant the ominous crackle of burning timbers reached their ears, while a tongue of flame shot through one of the narrow windows. Instantly the imprisoned miners divined the truth—the rink was on fire!

Fairly maddened with fear, the crowd made a resistless rush for the door, which was now suddenly thrown open, affording a way of egress. Weapons, valuables were heedlessly left behind, and men trampled each other like frightened sheep in their wild desire to escape from that hot-bed of death and destruction.

Simultaneously with the sound of the second whistle, the firing abruptly ceased.

The plotters knew by the signal that their comrades on the outside had succeeded in accomplishing their part of the scheme; their torches were completing the havoc, the light timbers of the rink were blazing furiously, and it was by no means likely that the terrified citizens, all absorbed in the problem of saving their own selves, would make any effort to save the burning building.

Tom Tanker's plan had met with huge success; but the worthy proprietor of the Red Light, alas! for him, was at that moment lying lifeless upon the floor of his bar-room, never to know the result of his villainous enterprise.

Their work now completed, the ruffians lost no time in getting away from the vortex of death which they had helped to create; having a thorough knowledge of the plot in all its details, they silently proceeded to make their exit through the narrow window behind the bar, where they knew no fire had been kindled. And as they went, no man forgot to fill his capacious pockets with the tempting bottles there displayed.

Scorched and blistered with the heat, which was fast becoming intolerable, the terrified miners scrambled like wildcats from the burning building.

Strange to relate, not a man had been slain; but many were severely wounded by the flying balls, while every one was bruised and battered from head to foot. Wild with pain and rage, they gathered about the burning rink, and vowed eternal vengeance on the perpetrators of the outrage.

Meantime, the Poker Prince and his little band of followers had by no means been idle spectators of the thrilling scene.

Karl Kent had acquainted himself with every nook and corner in and about the rink, and had completed the details of his plan with the cunning for which he was celebrated.

Two men were to attend to the roller queen, and that the work might be done as thoroughly as possible, the gambler determined, with Bowie Tom, to do that part himself.

He had rightly conjectured that the saloon men would not begin operations until after Minetta had taken the floor; so with his trusty follower he took up a position close to the railing, ready to leap upon the surface the instant the time for action arrived.

With the roller queen once in his grasp, the Poker Prince had cunningly provided a method of escape from the building.

In one corner of the rink was Malachi Moore's office, and from this a small door led to the open air.

In this vicinity lurked the remainder of Karl Kent's men, coolly indifferent to outward appearance, but ready, at the signal, to swiftly form a double line from the skating-floor to the office, through which the gambler might pass unmolested with his prize.

It was the Poker Prince's intention, when once outside the rink, to at once strike for the mountains with his followers; by the time the cits had recovered from their bewilderment sufficiently to look for the missing roller queen, he hoped to gain such a start as would enable him to give them the slip among the hills.

With his scheme complete in all its details, Karl Kent waited impatiently for the critical moment.

It came! A sudden crash of revolvers, a series of angry cries, and then the lights were extinguished, leaving the place in darkness and confusion.

At the first sign of disturbance, the alert gambler leaped upon the polished surface, with Bowie Tom close at his heels.

Minetta, the roller queen, bewildered by the pandemonium of cries that suddenly burst upon her ears, was about to check her speed, when she ran against an advancing form, and the next instant found herself clasped in a pair of long and muscular arms.

Vainly she struggled, for the gambler held her as in a vise, and he hissed exultantly to his ready satellite:

"I've got her, Tom! Follow me, an' cover my retreat. Hurry!"

Like a tiger with his prey, Karl Kent bounded swiftly away, quickly followed by Bowie Tom.

His men had not failed him; standing hand in hand, they formed on either side a human wall, against which a maddened sea of humanity surged in vain.

With bullets whistling viciously over his head, the Poker Prince dashed on with his precious burden. He had an unobstructed path, and in less than one minute after the first shot was fired, he found himself in the open air.

His men, their duty within the rink ended, lost no time in following, for the temperature inside the ill-starred skating-rink was fast becoming too torrid for comfort.

It was with feelings of exultation he could but partially restrain, that the gambler found himself safe on the outside, with the coveted prize secure within his grasp.

Thus far he had succeeded beyond his most sanguine expectations; his old-time good luck seemed to be returning.

"Nobly done, my brave boys," he exclaimed. "However, we are not safe yet; I shall breathe freely when I am far away from this accursed town, and not before. Follow me as noiselessly as possible."

With this command, the Poker Prince sped lightly down the street.

It was at this moment that Hurricane Kit issued from the Red Light, directly after his sanguinary argument with Tom Tanker.

Running fleetly up the street, the youth, by the light of the blazing rink that rendered objects in the vicinity as distinct as in daylight, saw the gambler's party advancing swiftly toward him.

Recognizing the persons instantly, he took in the situation at a single glance.

His weapon was in his hand, cocked and ready for use, but he dared not fire at the Poker Prince, as was his first impulse, lest he might strike the form of the fair roller queen.

Realizing this disadvantage the young man hesitated only for an instant; it was one against a dozen, but Kit's blood was boiling, and he paused not to consider the odds.

Resolved to frustrate the gambler's designs at all hazards, the youth placed himself determinedly in his path.

On came the ruffians; and as Karl Kent endeavored to dodge by, Hurricane Kit leaped upon him like a famished tiger.

But a dozen burly fellows were at hand, and Kit received a blow upon the head from a brawny fist.

His grasp relaxed, as, half-stunned, he reeled to the earth, while Kent sped on with a mocking cry of triumph.

Clarence, the Major, was the next man in the way. Not knowing whether to advance or retreat, he paused in a state of vague uncertainty, and the next moment received a blow on the stomach that doubled him up like a jack-knife, gasping for the breath that was nearly knocked out of his body.

By the time Hurricane Kit regained his feet, the Poker Prince and his followers had vanished in the darkness. Victory seemed to perch upon the gambler's banner.

But Hurricane Kit, though baffled, was not wholly outwitted. Quick to act, he hastened to the rink, where a crowd of excited citizens were congregated; as he approached, the voice of Malachi Moore was heard, as he ran bewilderedly hither and thither.

"Minetta! Minetta! Oh! where is my daughter? Has any one seen her?"

"Your daughter," cried Kit, at this moment rushing breathlessly up to the spot, "is now in the hands of Karl Kent and his cut-throats. The rascals are not far away. Men of Sylvania, you who have the feelings of a human in your hearts, follow me without delay. We can overtake them if we hurry."

His appeal was not fruitless. There was hardly a man who did not admire the beautiful skater, and at present they were boiling with indignation at the dastardly outrage that had been committed.

And so the next minute found Hurricane Kit, with Malachi Moore close to his side, speeding

swiftly in the direction taken by Karl Kent, while behind them followed a score of miners, grim and resolute.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE KNIFE-KING'S VENGEANCE.

AGAIN, a scene among the mountains. Precipitous walls tower aloft in savage grandeur; huge rocky fragments are strewn about in wild confusion.

High above hangs the dull gray sky of early morning; while the rising sun looks placidly down upon the little party that toil laboriously along the tortuous mountain path.

It is Karl Kent, the Poker Prince, and the remnant of his followers, fleeing from the wrath of the cits of Sylvania.

Clasped tightly in his strong arms, as if he was fearful that she would suddenly take unto herself wings, and fly away, the gambler bore the precious form of Minetta, the skating queen.

He had run a fearful risk to gain possession of her—had played a daring game, and won; and now he was determined that no power on earth should take her from him.

The queen, too amazed at her startling position to make any effort to escape, and, in truth, realizing that such an attempt would be worse than useless, lay passively in the gambler's arms.

She knew not whither she was being taken; neither had she the remotest conception of the nature of the hands into which she had fallen. Her face was pale and her hair disheveled, while upon her feet were still bound the dainty roller-skates, for Kent in his hurry had found no time to relieve her of these now useless ornaments.

There was a smile of satanical triumph on the evil face of the Poker Prince as, toiling wearily up the mountain, he gazed gloatingly down into the lovely face of his captive.

"Ha, ha. It is my turn, at last," he muttered, with the utmost satisfaction. "Yonder fools may storm and rave to their hearts' content, while I bear away the prize and laugh at their discomfiture. Ha, ha! Strive as they may, they cannot take her from me. She is mine—mine—mine!"

Hark! A distant shout suddenly reached the ears of the exultant Poker Prince. Turning his head, he beheld a party of men climbing up the side of the mountain.

Though a considerable distance away, being scarce within pistol-shot, the startled gambler had no difficulty in recognizing the new-comers as a party of Sylvania, with his hated foe, Hurricane Kit, at their head.

The trailers had just caught sight of the objects of their search, and the discovery had occasioned the shout that had alarmed the Poker Prince.

A furious curse pealed from the lips of the tiger. He had imagined himself tolerably safe, but here were the Sylvania bloodhounds hot upon his track. The prospect was decidedly unpleasant.

"Brace up, boys," he commanded, hurriedly, "for the infernal hounds are after us! Keep on as lively as possible, and give 'em a good dose of cold lead if they come too close. We must not be captured, if our legs and shooters can possibly help us out of this trap. Forward!"

And then commenced a most exciting chase. Up the mountain-side, scrambling like wildcats from rock to rock, fled the gambler's hirelings; the Poker Prince, nerved by desperation to almost superhuman efforts, kept ahead of them all with his precious burden. He was making a supreme struggle for life, liberty and triumph, and one that was worthy of a better cause.

And after them, in hot pursuit, came the angry Sylvania, led by Hurricane Kit, who leaped from crag to crag as nimbly as a squirrel.

As they ran the fugitives kept up a scattering fire upon their pursuers, but their aim was too hasty to admit of certainty, and the flying missiles did no apparent damage.

As for the pursuers, they did not dare return the fire for fear of hitting Minetta; but they held their weapons ready for use at closer quarters.

And thus the exciting chase of death went on, each party straining every nerve and sinew in the endeavor to gain advantage in the headlong race.

Now, when the trail was more than usually rough, the fugitives would be momentarily

hidden from their pursuers; then the next moment they would appear in plain view again.

And the Poker Prince observed, with fast-increasing apprehension, that his foes were slowly but surely creeping up upon them. Curses loud and deep fell from his panting lips, for he feared that his prize would be wrested from his grasp after all.

Suddenly his eagle eye caught sight of a dark opening in the mountain-side. He hailed it with the joy of the shipwrecked mariner who suddenly spies an approaching sail.

"In with you, men. Quick! before the dogs catch sight of us. Once inside, we can hold a thousand at bay. Lively!"

As he spoke, Karl Kent dashed into the opening, followed pell-mell by his panting men.

They knew not what manner of a place they were in; nor did they care, so long as they escaped the vengeance of the fierce man-hunters behind them. Breathlessly they stumbled along, as rapidly as the darkness would permit.

Suddenly the intense gloom was lit up by a blinding glare, and Karl Kent, who was in advance of the rest, beheld a scene that elicited a cry of mingled horror and dismay from his bloodless lips.

He was within a spacious cavern; and before him, wild and unearthly in the ghastly light, towered the huge form of the dread Knife-King!

There was the look of a demon on his face, a maniacal glare in his flashing eyes; and each hand convulsively clutched the haft of an enormous bowie.

At sight of this grim apparition suddenly looming up before him, the Poker Prince felt his very soul quake with terror.

"The Knife-King, by Heaven!" he gasped. "I am lost!"

And wheeling, he fled after his men, who, feeling that the society of Hurricane Kit's party was preferable to that of the avenger, were already in precipitate retreat.

"Ha, ha, ha!" fiendishly rung the laughter of the dread Knife-King. "Stop, Bowie Tom! I want you!"

Karl Kent could not see what followed, but he heard the dull thud of a falling body at his side, and felt that the avenging blade had overtaken Number Five.

Maddened with fear and rage, but still clinging to the form of the roller queen, Kent rushed out of the death-passage.

Together with his surviving followers, the luckless Poker Prince reached the open air, just in time to meet the Sylvania man-hunters.

He was trapped!

It was the very spot where Hurricane Kit had once encountered the grizzly. Behind him was the Knife-King, in front the yawning chasm, while on either side Kit's trailers were drawn up, grim and determined.

One rapid glance showed the Poker Prince the cunning trap into which he had unwittingly fallen, but not for an instant did he falter.

Abandoning the roller queen at last—for, much as he thought of her, he held his own life still dearer—he leaped forward, with a furious curse.

"Cut your way through, boys!" he excitedly shouted. "Don't let them take you alive!"

Nerved by desperation, the ruffians furiously attacked their enemies, heedless of the fact that they were outnumbered three to one; and then commenced a conflict brief as it was desperate.

A short struggle, and a confusion of shouts and pistol-shots, and the fight was at an end.

Every ruffian had been slain outright, while their leader, the dreaded Tiger of Sylvania, lay bound hand and foot upon the earth, helpless at last.

Eagerly the triumphant miners gathered around the prostrate Poker Prince, who met them with a scowl of defiance, but uttered not a word.

At this moment from the underground passage issued the terrible Knife-King.

The miners fell back instinctively, as the mysterious being advanced until he stood within a pace of the prostrate gambler.

Supernaturally wild and fierce he seemed, and no wonder the Poker Prince's bold heart quailed.

"Karl Kent," impressively uttered the avenger, "after many years of search, at last I meet you face to face. Of course you know me, and remember that murderous work planned and executed with your own fiendish ingenuity. Ay! tremble, you dog, for the day of judgment is at hand. One by one have your scoundrelly companions fallen before my avenging hand, until now you, the last of the Doomed Six, are helpless in my power."

"Karl Kent, there is one question I wish to ask you. If you have any hope of mercy, tell me if my child, my only daughter, is dead or alive. Was she left behind, or did you take her with you?"

The thoughts of possible leniency caused a faint hope to rise in the breast of the Poker Prince, and after a moment of hesitation, he made answer to the avenger's queries.

"The child was taken with us as far as Denver, when, eager to get rid of her, I placed her in the orphan asylum there. That is the last I ever saw of her."

"Are you speaking the truth, Karl Kent?" sternly demanded Kenneth Kirke.

"He is!"

The speaker was Malachi Moore, the late rink proprietor, and he came forward with his face wreathed in smiles.

"Listen!" he exclaimed. "Some years ago I visited the asylum in Denver, and while there was attracted by the beauty of one of the inmates, a little girl of tender age. Upon making inquiries concerning her, I learned that she had been left by a person answering the description of this man, the Poker Prince. Being greatly pleased with the child, I at once adopted her as my own. Kenneth Kirke, I believe your daughter is still alive, and what is more, now stands before you as Minetta the roller queen!"

A deep silence followed this unexpected declaration, for all were too astonished to say a word. But suddenly they were aroused into action.

The Poker Prince had been stealthily working at his bonds, which were but insecurely fastened, and now, free once more, he leaped to his feet with a fiendish yell, the thoughts of a very demon in his breast.

Minetta was standing near the edge of the precipice, and the gambler, darting forward, lifted her in his sinewy arms as if she were but a feather, before the amazed lookers-on could comprehend the true condition of affairs.

"Ha! ha!" he laughed, exultantly. "I have cheated you, Kenneth Kirke, after all!"

With a cry of dismay Hurricane Kit bounded forward, but he was too late.

The Poker Prince, with a mocking laugh, leaped over the brink with his prize; and a long, despairing shriek came floating up from the dismal depths, as they went down—down—down together.

An unearthly cry rose upon the air—a cry of mingled rage and agony that curdled the blood in the veins of the listeners, as Kenneth Kirke, the Knife-King, gave one mad bound and disappeared in the yawning chasm, gone to seek his arch-enemy in the arms of death!

CONCLUSION.

Slowly and sadly, Hurricane Kit and his band of man-hunters returned to Sylvania.

When they arrived, it was to find that most of the gang who had been concerned in the destruction of the skating-rink had wisely made themselves scarce in the neighborhood. Those who were audacious enough to remain were summarily tried, found guilty and strung up by the indignant miners.

Malachi Moore, sad and disheartened, left for Denver on the first stage. His enterprise had proved a dear one.

And Clarence the Major departed, too. Disconsolate and broken-spirited, he determined to ostracize himself to some barren wilds, where he might nurse his sorrowing heart in peace.

He got as far as the next town, where he took the first step toward ameliorating his grief by proceeding to get ingloriously "full."

The skating-rink was never rebuilt, and so the craze died out in Sylvania as quickly as it began; but on the spot a neat tablet was erected, bearing upon its face the inscription:

SACRED
TO THE MEMORY OF
MINETTA,
THE ROLLER QUEEN.

Hurricane Kit, bold and restless, continued on in quest of further sport and adventure; but he often looked back, as one of the most exciting periods of his life, to the time when the Doomed Six of Sylvania were hunted to earth by Kenneth, the Knife-King!

THE END.

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